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PILLARS OF THE HOUSE

CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

VOL. III

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THE

PILLARS OF THE HOUSE;

OR,

UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.

VOL. III.

THE

PILLARS OF THE HOUSE;

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UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.

BY

CHARLOTTE M. YONGE,
AUTHOR OF 'THE HEIR OF REDCLYFFE,' ETC.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

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THE

PILLARS OF THE HOUSE;

OR,

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THE PILLARS OF THE HOUSE;

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CHAPTER XXIV.

FAMILY GHOOLS.

'Know ye that Love is a careless child,
And forgets promise past?
He is blind—he is deaf where he list,
And in faith never fast.'

Raleigh.

CAPTAIN HAREWOOD was gone. There was a good deal of truth in Wilmet's plea that much pain might have been saved if she had been allowed to abide by her first answer; but by this time she would not have saved it.

She was a brave woman, and never sought indulgence; and all she accepted was the spending his last Saturday and Sunday at his home with him; and even on this she durst not venture without taking Alda, and exposing the dear untidy household to her disdain; but that October Sunday walk by the river was worth it all—worth infinitely more than the July walk; and they both declared it gave them strength.

Wilmet returned in time for Monday's school, nor did she give in all the week; but she looked whiter and whiter, and on Saturday morning turned so faint while dressing, that Alda in a great fright called in Sibby; and the unprecedented event occurred of her spending two whole days in bed. She only begged to be let alone; and after this space of quiet came down again fully recovered, only, as Geraldine daily felt, softer, gentler, tenderer, less severely strict, and moreover a less hard mistress to her own beauty.

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Meantime Alda grew increasingly restless and drooping as the autumn advanced. The confined rooms and monotonous life really affected health accustomed to variety, change, and luxury; nor could idleness, disappointment, or ill-humour be wholesome diet. Listless and weary, she dropped all semblance of occupation, except novel reading; and there she perversely set her mind on whatever Froggatt and Underwood wished to keep out of their library. If Ferdinand did not come down for a Sunday, they both looked at the end of it as if they had been worrying one another to death; if he did not come down, she was affronted and miserable. Her restlessness was increased by the fact that people were returning to their winter-quarters in London, and it was to be inferred that the Thomas Underwoods might soon be there; but Marilda had not the art of letter-writing, and though she had several times sent a few warm-hearted lines, encouraging Alda's correspondence, this had dropped soon after the yearly migration to Spa; and no more was known of the family movements till there was a letter from Edgar to Cherry. He was a very uncertain correspondent—always delightful, affectionate, and amusing, when he did write, but often not doing so for weeks together; and nothing had been heard of him since he had as usual gone abroad in the middle of the summer.

He now wrote from Spa, in amazement at the accumulation of family events which Marilda had poured upon him, and especially desirous to know how *any* captain of any service had ventured upon accosting W. W. He could not recover the loss it had been not to witness the siege and the surrender! For himself, Cherry gathered that he had begun, as he had led her to suppose he would, with the Channel Isles; but whether he had seen Alice she could not make out; and he had then made his way, wandering and sketching in old Continental towns, as he had done last year. He always declared that it answered; he could dispose of his sketches when he came home, and could likewise write clever bright descriptions, that could usually command tolerable remuneration. This time, however, he had been nearly reduced to the condition of George Primrose, and had made his way to join the family caravan at Spa, by way of getting helped home.

There he was hailed with delight, for Mr. Underwood was very

unwell and irritable, prejudiced against German doctors, yet not choosing to have advice from England, and not fit for a journey without some effective person to rule him and his wife; for resolute as Marilda could be, the passionateness of one parent, and the fat flabby helplessness of the other, had overcome her powers of management at such a distance from home. It was Edgar's private belief that 'the poor old boy had had some kind of stroke;' but he had recommended the homeward journey, and under his escort it was to be immediately undertaken. A few days more, and tidings came that it had been successfully accomplished. Mr. Underwood had grown better at every stage, and now scouted the notion of a doctor; Alda's letters of inquiry were joyously answered and her spirits sank.

One afternoon, however, a moon face beamed upon Felix, and a hearty voice exclaimed, 'How d'ye do? This is a surprise, ain't it? My father is come down on business, so I made him bring me. I don't like Alda's account of herself.'

'I'll take you to her,' said Felix, who decidedly disapproved of private greetings in the present locality; so as soon as she had dealt with her fly, he conducted her upstairs. Her father had gone to Mr. Bruce, and would come for her. Alda was alone in the drawing-room, but she sprang to her feet in ecstacy; and the two cousins were soon clinging together, and devouring one another with kisses. Felix asked where Cherry was.

'Oh! for pity's sake, Felix, do let us have a little time to ourselves!' said Alda; 'I'll call Cherry by the time she has done with Stella.'

Felix had come to trust nothing concerning Geraldine to Alda; so he shut the door, and found Cherry in her own room, overlooking Stella's copy to the sound of Theodore's accordion, all three in warm jackets. Six months ago he would have made an authoritative remonstrance. Now he had learnt that cold and exile were more tolerable than Alda's displeasure.

Stella leapt up, connecting Cousin Marilda's name with the choicest presents; but Cherry was quite willing to withhold herself. It was eight years since she had seen Marilda, and she was conscious of more repulsion than attraction. She was still debating between civility and consideration for the *tête-à-tête*, when Wilmet, for whom

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Felix had sent, came for her, with cheeks glowing from Marilda's energetic kisses and congratulations.

There certainly was a treading on the delicate tips of the feelings. 'O Geraldine, I am glad to see you getting about so well! You are a courageous girl.' Then to Stella: 'You little darling duck! Here is a box of goodies for you and the other poor little dear.—Where is he? You'll let me see him.—What, Lance! I've not seen you since I found you up a tree!'

The cousinly cordiality was pleasant, and her patronage was not coarse, like her mother's; but there was a certain excess of frankness that made them feel like sensitive-plants, when she examined Wilmet how often she heard from India, and how the Harewoods treated her—when she wanted to know exactly how matters stood between the Pursuivant and Tribune, whether Mr. Smith were to blame, why Lance had gone into the business, and —worse than all—what was the measure of Theodore's intellect.

It was all meant in kindness and sympathy, but it was very trying to each victim in turn; and the lookers-on found it as impossible to lead it away as to divert the rush from a pump. When Felix was about to return to his work, Marilda jumped up, exclaiming, 'Felix, I must speak to you;' and when she had him alone in the drawing-room, she began, 'Felix, I must take Alda home. We can't get on without her; and she looks very poorly, and all that nonsense is blown over.'

'You know she is still engaged.'

'Oh yes; but no one will think of that unless it is brought forward, and that she promises not to do.'

'I believe it will be best,' he answered. 'Our life is not suited to her, and she is neither well nor happy; but it is very kind of you.'

'Kind to ourselves. If Wilmet had married at once we should never have got her back at all, and we want her sadly. I can help my father in some ways, but I can't amuse him as she can. You don't mind?'

'Certainly not, if Mr. and Mrs. Underwood wish it,' said Felix, wondering how Alda made herself either amusing or useful; 'I suppose it is all right, and that they know how it stands.'

'Of course they do. They will only be too glad to have her; and though it is better to say nothing about it just yet, very likely

it may end in his coming into our house, and being what Edgar might have been. How well he has behaved !'

'So has some one else,' thought Felix, as he saw her glistening eye; but he only answered, 'He is an excellent fellow.'

'Another thing, Felix. This engagement of Edgar's—is it in earnest?'

'Yes!' emphatically said Felix; 'I trust so.'

'You! I should have thought nothing could be more foolish. Is she such a nice girl, then?'

He had had time to recollect himself, and answered in his set manner, 'She is all that could be wished; and though of course there is a certain imprudence in the engagement, I can only wish to see Edgar persevere honourably in what he has undertaken.'

'But wouldn't it be great misery?'

'It might be,' said Felix; 'but it is not going to happen yet. Of course, no one could have wished it to begin; but having begun, he ought to go on.'

'Of course! I hate shilly-shally. My father would not believe there was anything in it. But you are right, Felix; it has done Edgar good. Somehow there's more purpose in him; and I believe he has worked more steadily this season. I am so glad you say she is a nice girl.'

And Felix went down to his work happier than he had been for nearly a year. What loss to himself equalled the gain of such a report of Edgar?

Marilda insisted on being shown every corner of the house, and was evidently full of enjoyment, like a child let loose from school, talking at random, so as to draw on herself more than one remonstrance from Alda, who had perfectly recovered her good-humour, and was absolutely gracious to Cherry.

About four o'clock came Thomas Underwood, embracing Alda like another daughter. 'My poor child, you are not looking well.'

'Not at all, papa,' said Marilda. 'We will take her home, and set her up again.'

'Ay, we will!' said her father. 'It has been a pretty muddle altogether; but there—we'll say no more about it. You'll come home, and be a wise girl.'

'O Uncle, how kind you are!' cried Alda.

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Wilmet and Cherry looked at each other in amaze. What might this mean? How could Alda bear to be received back on such terms? But they could say nothing; indeed, they were scarcely seen till the greeting to Alda was over. Then, however, he made up for it by hearty kisses, for which they were not prepared; and Wilmet coloured crimson as she was again congratulated and rallied on her slyness in making the most of her time at Minsterham.

The illness at Spa had told upon Thomas Underwood. He was still under fifty, but an elderly look and manner had come on him; he walked feebly, and seemed to look to his daughter to help him out with purposes and recollections; while towards Alda there was an almost imploring tenderness, as if she had carried away with her a good deal of the enjoyment of his life, which he hoped to bring back again with her. He did not even seem to like leaving her for the evening to pack up, but wanted her to come out to Centry Park, and caught eagerly at Marilda's proposal that Felix should come and spend the evening there. It was as if they were both afraid of their own dullness in the great uninhabited house; and no doubt they would have caught at an invitation to share the family meal. Alda and Wilmet, for different reasons, sat in dread of Felix, in the reckless hospitality of the male heart, making such an offer; and in very truth, he was only withheld by certain authoritatively deprecating glances from those housewifely eyes.

And let it be observed that Wilmet was right. She could not have fed Mr. Underwood as would have suited him on such short notice, without a great deal more expense and personal exertion than would have been becoming; and to his eyes, their ordinary fare would have seemed ostentation of neediness.

Needy was exactly what the Underwoods had never been. It was not merely the effect of conscience and of resolution, but of Wilmet's more than ordinary power of method and adjustment, which had kept them from ever being behindhand, or in difficulties requiring external aid; and it was this that had won them already respect that hardly belonged to their years.

Thomas Underwood really respected Felix, as one who had never asked assistance from him, yet who had not declined what was offered in a friendly kinsman-like manner; and besides, had more than once asserted—modestly indeed, but still asserted—an

independent will and way of his own, and shown that he was capable of carrying it out. It was five years since Mr. Underwood's prediction that he would find the attempt keeping house for such a family an utter failure, and would have to fall back on help he had not deserved: and here he was, without having made one demand, a partner in the business, and with so small a fraction of the family apparent, that there was no air of oppression, no complaint, even though Thomas himself had returned on his hands both those of whom he had meant to relieve him.

No wonder, then, that without intending it, his manner to Felix was not that of patron, but of equal—of kinsman to kinsman, not of rich man to struggling youth. And Felix, as he sat in the great handsome dining-room, could not help being amused at all the state that had followed one man and his daughter for one dinner in their own house: the courses, and the silver, and the perplexing family of wine-glasses beside every plate, and all with the Underwood rood and its motto shining on him—whether on the servant's buttons, on the panels of the oak-wainscotted hall, and the very china from which he ate his dinner.

Nothing interested Mr. Underwood more than the account of the visit to Vale Leston; and warming up under the influence of dinner, he talked much of the old times there, and with much disparagement of the two present Fulberts; but Felix was startled to find that he regarded himself as next in the succession.

'If you could only have gone into the Church, Felix, I could have given you the Vicarage. Or is not one of your brothers to be a parson?'

'Yes, Sir—Clement,' said Felix, smiling, but feeling a sense of injury that revealed to him how much more he must be reckoning on the chances than he had supposed himself to be doing. As Alda said, wealth flowed to wealth; and a little attention from Thomas to his cousins would easily turn the scale.

At any rate, poverty did not suit Alda. She was a different creature now that her exile was coming to an end.

'It had been like Portsmouth to Fanny Price,' said Geraldine, not greatly flattered by the overflow of benevolence, which Wilmet accepted as the token of real affection.

'What would she do about Ferdinand?' Wilmet ventured to ask.

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'He certainly must not call,' said Alda; 'that would never do; but with Edgar's help it will be manageable enough. It will do the gentleman no harm to have a few difficulties in his way. I don't want him to feel his coming such a favour.'

So Alda went; and must it be owned, if there was more peace in the house, there was also a certain flatness after the incessant excitements of the former part of the year. At least so Geraldine felt, and hated herself for feeling, when the numbers had come down to 'the peace establishment,' and she had no companions but Stella and Theodore through the greater part of the day. She had been recommended to walk, when the weather permitted, for half an hour every day; and whenever it was possible, Felix contrived that he or Lance should be her companion; but as the days shortened, and it became less easy to contrive this, the constitutional turns up and down the narrow garden were more dispiriting than sitting occupied upstairs, especially when she viewed this distaste as frightful unthankfulness; and even when one of the brothers took her out in the street, or to the 'People's Park,' though she was happy with them, the wearisome sameness and dull ugliness of the town oppressed and wearied her; and to be taken out by Wilmet on a Saturday was more wearing still. Each brother was her devoted cavalier; but Wilmet, though kind and considerate, made airing Cherry a secondary object; and to be set upon a high chair in a shop, to see Wilmet bargain, was what she did not love. She might have admired to see Wilmet's perfect knowledge of articles and their value, and the manifest esteem in which that experience was held by the respectable tradesmen, who did not scruple to tell her that they had thought 'this will just suit Miss Underwood;' while her scorn and indignation at an encounter with a Cheap Jack were something rich. But though Cherry could describe such an expedition with humour that threw Felix and Lance into a convulsion of merriment, it was very wearisome to her; and the more she knew it ought to be instructive, the more it depressed her, and made her feel, as never before, the straitness of the family means. She longed wearily at times for the sight of something beautiful. Edgar's descriptions came back on her with an almost sick longing. She had made much progress in drawing, but the want of criticism, instruction, or models, made

her feel baffled; and when her brothers and sisters admired most, she was most dissatisfied. Edgar's criticism alone was worth anything to her æsthetic sense, and gave her real assistance; and his not coming home was a great loss to her art, as well as to her affection and intellect. Those windows that he opened to her of all lovely scenes and forms in nature or art, his brilliant stories of artist society and foreign manners, could not be greatly missed as she lived her monotonous life, not without intellectual interest, for that came to her through the help she was able to render to Felix in his newspaper work, and the books she reviewed or discussed with him; but it was not the living interest of actual communication at secondhand with that outer world, which looked so full of beauty, and of all that was bright and charming; and then poor little Cherry applied to herself all the warnings about not loving the world.

Her aspiring compositions and her studies in drawing she almost laid aside in a fit of hopeless disgust, and she applied herself to what was less improving, but more immediately profitable. She and Lance took to the manufacture of Christmas cards, she taking the sentiment and he the comedy; and what they produced by their joint efforts were pretty and clever enough to bring in an amount of pocket-money that was very agreeable to those who otherwise would have had no claim to any.

The chief outer interest was, as usual, parish affairs. Mr. Bevan was too ill to come home; but Mr. Mowbray Smith's resignation was accepted, and he was to go at the beginning of the new year, while his successor was reported to be elderly and wise.

Another interest, that was not at all bad for Cherry, was stirred up by her brothers. There was an interminable family belonging to one of the printers, who died, leaving them in circumstances that somewhat parodied those of the Underwoods themselves; and in which the example as well as the counsel of the young master was no doubt a great incentive and assistance to the pillars of the still humbler house. There was a perennial supply of 'little Lightfoots,' to fill the office elegantly termed printer's devil; and the existing imp being taken young from school, Felix had his education on his conscience, and asked Cherry to give him lessons after hours. She was at first desperately afraid of the boy, and

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only accepted the work when she found that if she did not, Felix would impose it on himself; but by-and-by she became enough interested, and enjoyed enough devotion from her pupil, to make the time she daily expended upon him not far from one of the pleasures of her life.

So came on a winter of unusual bitterness; and the holidays filled the house, bringing Bernard back under an entirely new phase. At Stoneborough he had discovered that it was some distinction to be an Underwood of Vale Leston, and his accession of dignity was enormous. He regarded the Nareses from a monstrous elevation; and thus infinitely scandalized Angela, who had a great hatred of pretension, and whose laughter threatened to dissolve their mutual alliance, offensive and defensive. Their janglings were a novelty, and not a pleasant one; and one bitter afternoon, when a sore throat had made Felix come up early from the shop, Cherry quite rejoiced that Bernard was reported to be reading downstairs.

And there sat Felix by the fire, with Theodore at his feet, humming in rivalry of the big kettle, which had just been brought in, and was soon followed by Lance, whistling as he came upstairs.

'Look here!' and Angela, who, for her bane at Brompton, had her full share of the family talent for caricature, showed him a likeness of Bernard strutting down the High Street, turning his back on certain figures in the distance; and beneath was written—

'There was a young Bear of Stoneborough,
Who thought his gentility thorough;
To his townsfolk he said,
"Snobs! I'll cut them all dead,"
This high-bred young Bear of Stoneborough.'

'Capital, Angel!' said Lance; 'but don't show it to him; he's a horrid Bear to poke fun at.'

'Oh, but he does get into such jolly rages!'

'It is beyond being jolly,' said Lance. 'I did this once too often last holidays; and I don't think he has got over it yet, though I promised never to do it again.'

'The more reason I should,' said Angela, laughing saucily in his face, though both spoke under their breath.

'No,' said Lance. 'Consider! He is absurdly stuck up; but anything to disgust him with the Nareses is good.'

'I see no harm in Jem Nares,' said democratic Angela. 'I'll not have him cut! give me my picture.'

'No, I promised he should not be done again.'

'Promise for yourself another time.'

She snatched, and there was a sparring match. Lance held off with one hand, and with the other dashed her drawing into the fire, where it fell on the top of some black coals; and as he relaxed his grasp, she sprang to rescue it. Felix looked up in time to see the kettle toppling over. He flung Theodore out of the way of the boiling stream that rushed from lid and spout as the whole descended on the hearth, amid cries from Angela and Theodore that brought all the others together; nor could the little one be pacified, even though Wilmet ascertained that he had only been touched by one boiling drop.

'But Felix!' exclaimed Lance; and they all turned.

'Never mind,' he said, but with more of a contraction of the lips than a smile; 'only my neck and arm. Here, Lance, help me;' presenting the end of his sleeve, and setting his teeth.

The hasty vigorous pull, made in ignorance on both sides, removed the coat; but Felix gave something between a gasp and a cry, tried to totter to a chair, and was caught by Clement as he fainted away; so much to the terror of Lance, that in three minutes' space he had broken in on Mr. Rugg's dinner with a peremptory summons. By the time he crept into the room behind the doctor, he saw Felix on the sofa, white as a sheet, with closed eyes and drawn brow, Clement standing ready with a roll of wadding, and Wilmet, having more gently removed the shirtsleeve, regarding the injury with some perplexity, increased by the tearful Sibby's voluble counsels.

She welcomed the arrival with the anxious inquiry, 'O Mr. Rugg! I am so glad! Should the cotton touch where the skin is broken? —Here—inside his elbow and hand.'

'Broken! You have been tearing off the clothes, instead of cutting them! I thought you knew better, Miss Underwood.'

'It was my own doing,' murmured Felix, so faintly, that Mr. Rugg, with his usual roughness, scolded at his not having had

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some brandy at once, and then at there being none nearer than the Fortinbras Arms, whence Clement brought some in about the time that a grand butler would have taken to produce it. Felix choked at it like a child, but it brought back his strength; and Wilmet and Clement were assistants too handy to give much occasion for scolding. The shoulder and chest had suffered likewise, though partly protected by the flannel shirt.

On the patient asking how soon he might hope for the use of his arm, the gruff answer was, 'Not so soon as if you had not begun by tearing it to pieces. I can't tell. Depends on general health. May be three weeks, may be six, may be three months, before you get these places healed, if you trifle with them. Now I'll stay and see you in bed, with this arm properly settled.'

This was real kindness for a man in the middle of his dinner; and Felix stood up, finding himself more shaken than he had expected, and commanded by acclamation to betake himself to Mr. Froggatt's bedroom. He chose, however, first to go into the next room, where Cherry had sunk down, trembling and overcome, and so hysterical that her utmost powers had been taxed to prevent herself from disturbing those who could be useful.

'Here I am, all alive!' he said in a cheerful tone, that somehow had no solidity in it, and which she could hardly bear. 'Why, Cherry, you poor little thing! you have come by the worst of it!'

'Don't, Felix! Isn't it dreadful pain?'

'Not now; I scarcely feel it. Never mind, Cherry; I'm all right now, only you will have to write those little fingers nearly off.'

'Oh! Felix, if Wilmet had been gone!'

'She wouldn't be looking Gorgons at me now. Where's Angel?'

Angel had been seized by Robina, and forcibly withheld from flying out after the doctor; and when assured that Lance was gone, she had dashed upstairs, and hidden herself in bed, so that Felix was obliged to go to sleep without seeing her. Remonstrate as he would, he was not allowed to get up the next morning. Mr. Rugg, who came very early, assured him that the speed of his recovery greatly depended on perfect stillness at first, and told him that he

would feel the injury if he tried to move; and Wilmet would not do anything but rejoice that he was compelled to submit to discipline that was so good for the cold, a much more real subject of anxiety.

'I must not grumble,' he sighed, as the doctor shut the door; 'but I did not reckon on such a stupid disaster when I got two boys to look after everything.'

'People will not mind for a few days.'

'I hope not. Tell Lance to send Lamb up to me as soon as he comes in. And would Clem walk over to Marshlands? or the Froggery will be in great commotion.'

'Perhaps Robina will go too; and they always like to have her.'

'And Angel? Poor child! I wish she would come.'

'I'll send her. I want you to talk to her. She is such a perplexity.'

'*This* was no fault of hers!' exclaimed Felix.

'I don't know that. Lance takes it on himself, and says it was just a squabble; but that is sure to have been her fault.'

'I shall not go into that,' said Felix.

'It does seem a chance of making an impression, if you would try,' said Wilmet. 'Sibby says she was crying half the night, (you know she has to sleep in the nursery,) and you might get at her now. I don't know what to do with her.'

He looked up, astonished at this avowal, from her who had hitherto queened it so easily.

'Look at this letter,' she proceeded. 'I have been keeping it till you had time to think about it.'

He sighed, feeling, like many another head of the house, that time was swept away from home responsibilities, and indeed, that great girls needed a more experienced guide. The letter was the school character, speaking most highly of Robina, who had quite reconquered esteem. If she had not so much of any one talent as some of the others, she had excellent capacity, and studied in a business-like way, as one learning a profession; so that she had won her promotion into the first ranks, among elder girls.

But Angela was one of those who will not or cannot do anything tolerably except what they like; and she had only two tastes—for

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music and fun—except perhaps for churches. She was a puzzle to every one, by her eagerness for devout observances, and the very little good they seemed to do her, even by outrageous irreverence when the spirit of mischief was roused. Teachers detested her, but she was the idol of half the school. All unclaimed misdeeds were laid to her share; and in recklessness or generosity, she never troubled herself to disavow them, even when not her own. She was popularly believed to learn nothing but music, and even in that to use talent to save pains; and she had a lead-like affinity to the bottom of her class, yet in the final examination she had surpassed far more diligent girls.

Felix read, and puzzled himself, and did not refuse obedience when Wilmet insisted that he should 'talk to Angela;' though he was only too well aware that reproof was that paternal duty to which he was least adequate. First, however, he had time to despatch Robina and Clement on their mission to his partner, whose winter rheumatics had set in—to receive young Lamb, laden with a pile of letters and papers, and lastly, to be cooed over and stroked by Theodore, who curled himself up at his feet in that perfect serenity that his presence always infused.

At last Angela came in on tip-toe, looking immensely tall and lank, with Clement's propensity for longitudinal growth, and the same infantine smallness of feature, and much less brilliant colouring than the others; but while his hair was as closely cropped as if he were just out of a cell, hers was as long and as unmanageable as herself; and she had moreover the beautiful large-pupilled, darkly-lashed, mischievous blue eyes that belonged to Edgar, only now their lids were swollen, and all the colour in her face centred in two great red patches beneath them—a scarlet garibaldi over a very old brown skirt, half-way up a long pair of grey legs, seeming to make the whole object more deplorable.

'You poor Angel!' exclaimed Felix, his heart more than ever melted; 'you look as if you had been crying all night. Why don't you come and give me a kiss?'

'I'll—I'll do anything you please, Felix, but I had rather not.'

'But I do please! I want you,' said he, holding out his hand; so that she was forced to come, touch his cheek with her lips, and submit to a far heartier kiss. 'You are as cold as ice,' he added,

trying to capture the blue, chilly, long, sausage-like fingers, and warm them in his grasp.

'No, don't! it will only make my chilblains rage. Let me go, now you've forgiven me for your own comfort.'

'Forgiven you for my own comfort! I don't want to forgive you—'

'Oh—h!' and the eyes disappeared, and the face puckered in unutterable woe.

'I haven't anything to forgive you, Angel.'

'Oh, that's worse! when I've hurt you so terribly!'

'*You* didn't; you never meant it. Of course I never blamed you.'

'Then,' said Angel, trying to get away her other hand, 'why did you send for me to row me, for I don't call that forgiving.'

'I heard you were unhappy.'

'And did you think it would make me any happier to see you lying there frowning with pain?' broke out Angela, with an angry sob.

'If I frowned, it was not with pain, but because I don't know what to make of you.'

'I don't want to be made anything of!' she said pettishly. 'Wilmet told me you wanted to talk to me. I suppose that meant she ordered you! So now you've done it, let me go.'

'My dear Angel, don't you see that I am just as anxious about you as Wilmet can be? and when there is plainly something amiss—'

'Oh, it's old Ful and Fen's character of me, then?'

'It is, Angela. Perhaps it does seem taking an unfair advantage of you to catch you now; but you see I so seldom get a chance of a talk with any one; and I must do the best I can for you, you poor little ones, who, I'm afraid, haven't even the faintest recollection of our father and mother to help you.'

'I remember mamma, but after she was ill,' said Angela, probably trying not to be softened. 'But I don't think that has much to do with it. You and Wilmet mind us as much, or more, than most people's born parents. Yes, Wilmet worrits twice as much as any rational mother does.'

'That's the very thing, Angel; parents can do the thing without worrying.'

[illegible] never did till this
[illegible] him with a
[illegible] made him laugh,

[illegible] You keep
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herself—don't like long services, and get tired, but I don't. I'm safe then; I'm happy altogether. I seem to get wings inside—I could go on singing for ever. I don't want to be bad; but the instant I go out, I can't live without fun; and so they think me a horrid false hypocrite—but I'm not! Only unless I get shut up somewhere, I don't know what will become of me.'

'You must try to make your life out of church suit your life in church,' said Felix, much puzzled how to answer.

'I would, only I can't be half-and-half, and wishy-washy.'

'I don't understand.'

'Don't you? Why, if I have fun, I like to have it real fun. I can't be always drawing it mild! It is no real fun if one is to be always thinking about who will be vexed, and what's ladylike, and all that stuff!'

'But that's what life in this world is made of.'

'I know it is; so I hate life in this world, unless one could just have no conscience at all;' then, as she caught his anxious eye, she went on, trying to rattle, but with tears in her voice, and submitting to let him warm her hands all the time, 'Felix, you'd better let me go into a Sisterhood. It is the only chance for me! Thinking about being a horrid governess makes me wicked. When I'm good I do long for a Sisterhood; and when I'm bad I want to get some great rich duke to marry me, and let me have no end of horses, and go to the races and the opera—and I don't suppose he will ever come. And I *suppose* you are all too dull and tiresome to let me get to be a public singer! No, don't tell me to put it out of my head, for it is what I should like best—best of all!'

'Better than the duke?'

'Oh yes! for I think he would be in the way—Felix! *do* let me be a Sister! You see it is the only chance.'

'I can't, Angel; they would not accept a Sister at your age.'

'Then let me think about it *really*, Felix. Promise that I may be when I am old enough.'

'It is impossible to promise that; but I do not think I am likely to hinder you, if you then wish it, and it seems right.'

'I wish you would promise me. Look here, Felix,' and the eyes assumed a deep yearning expression; 'I always did think that if I

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had a dedication, like Clement, I could be as good as he is. But I don't think anything else would put the duke or the opera out of my head.'

'My dear Angel,' and Felix's eyes grew soft too, 'I could not wish anything better for you than to be such another as Sister Constance, but I do not know how you could be dedicated. Even Clement is not; he could change his mind before he is three-and-twenty. It all depends on how he goes on.'

'And if I go on well, will you let me look to it?'

'As far as may be right.'

'Only then what is the use of my going to this school, if I am not to turn governess? It only makes me worse.'

'No, Angela. It would not be right to stop your education. You must have the means of maintaining yourself. It would be against my duty to hinder that. And remember—some Sisterhoods require an endowment. You would not wish to be a burthen. You may have to work to raise means for admission; and if you are set to teach, you will need all you are learning now.'

'May I think I am preparing?'

'Yes.'

'I will, I will—I mean, I will try,' said Angela. 'O Felix! I do like you now I find you don't want me to be respectable. No, don't say something grave and prosy, for I *do* like you now; and never mind about not being one's father, for I don't believe anybody could be better to me.' And she put her face down to his and kissed him as she used when she was a baby girl; then ran away on thinking she heard some one coming.

'So,' thought Felix, as he raised himself on his sound elbow, 'the upshot of it is that I don't want her to be respectable! I hope to goodness she won't take to being like Tina—though I don't know why I should either! Poor child! I'll write to Audley about her when I can. And here comes the dear little Cherry for her hard day's work.'

With his dictation and superintendence, Geraldine was quite equal to the Pursuivant's Friday requirements; and altogether this day of rest and leisure was welcome. The sisters were much less anxious about the sore throat than if it had been in the shop! and indeed it was nearly well, and no obstacle to his being talked

to and amused, to the general enjoyment, in the rare pleasure of having him at their mercy. In the afternoon came a message—'The Miss Pearsons' love, and if she could leave Mr. Underwood, would Miss Underwood step up?' Such messages were not infrequent, and this was supposed to spring from a desire to know the particulars of the accident; so that on her return Wilmet was greeted with the inquiry whether she was considered responsible for the tea-kettle's misbehaviour, since she had been kept in so long.

'No,' said Wilmet, gravely. 'Run away, little ones!'

Stella alone accepted the epithet; but Wilmet was too much absorbed in her tidings to look about in the fire-lit twilight for further victims.

'The Miss Pearsons are very much troubled by their letters from St. Heliers,' she said. 'Alice Knevett is actually married.'

'To Edgar?' Angela sprang up with a bound. 'Oh, what fun!'

'No, indeed,' Wilmet replied in her most repressive tone. 'It is to a Frenchman of the name of Tanneguy, in the wine-trade.'

'The abominable girl!' cried Angela at the top of her indignant voice. 'A Frenchman! I'll never believe in any one again.'

'Yes, Angela,' said Wilmet; 'it is a lesson, indeed, of what tricks and subterfuges—'

'Never mind that, Mettie,' disrespectfully broke in Cherry, who had quietly moved a curtain so as to cast a shade over Felix's face. 'Tell us about it. Who writes?'

Wilmet told that Major Knevett, in a storm of fury, had written to the aunts that the whole affair had been so secretly conducted, that neither he nor his wife had guessed at it until his daughter's sudden disappearance, only sending home a letter to announce her marriage to M. Achille Tanneguy, with whom she had embarked for Havre, and given an address at Pau, where her husband was concerned in a wine agency. Major Knevett had then found out that she had been in the constant habit of meeting this Tanneguy in the garden of their next neighbour, which joined to their own; and that she had entirely eluded the vigilance of 'her second mother,' who had, however, never ceased to warn and watch her;

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but nothing had been capable of curing her of the coquetry and intrigue, with which in his passion he accused Bexley of inspiring her.

'Too true.' The words were breathed on the back of a sigh suppressed with difficulty.

'Nonsense, Felix,' said Wilmet; 'It was in her before, or she could not have so carried it on here. I am sure it had gone on at her horrible school!'

'What has she done about Edgar?' asked Clement.

'The aunts doubt whether she has done anything.—Children, you ought to be getting ready for tea;' then when Robin and Angel had obeyed this very broad hint—'I would not say so before them, but they believe that there is a sort of excuse in the unhappiness of her home.'

'Of course,' said an almost grateful voice from the pillow.

'Ever since Edgar was there in the summer,' said Wilmet, 'she has been doubly watched and teazed and scolded. Nothing she could do was right. The aunts heard from her last a fortnight ago, very miserable, and entreating them to believe that whatever might happen, she was driven to it by the unbearable wretchedness of home.'

'Do you call that an excuse, Wilmet?' exclaimed Clement. 'Is the privilege of suffering to be made an excuse for treachery?'

'Much Clement knows of the privilege of suffering,' said Felix, low and quietly; but Geraldine detected so much of that privilege in his voice, that she longed to clear the room for him; but though she rose to set the example, and laid her hand on Clement's arm, there was no preventing his testimony from being delivered.

'Personally I do not know it; but I do not understand Wilmet's lowering her standard to excuse disobedience and unfaithfulness.'

'Come along, Clem,' entreated Geraldine; 'it is all most sad and grievous, but the more we say about it the worse we make it;' and she succeeded in dragging him out without a defensive reply from Wilmet.

Presently she was sought out by Wilmet herself, to say, 'Cherry, do you know, there's Felix looking as pale as when he fainted yesterday.'

She could believe it; but she only ventured to ask, 'Did he say anything?'

'No, only to answer "No," when I asked if I hurt him as I was *doing* his arm. Cherry, can you tell me, or do you know—does this touch him for himself?'

Cherry could only look up with eyes swimming.

'How blind I have been! Oh! if I had not come and told it so abruptly, before every one!'

'Perhaps he liked the unconsciousness better!'

'Were you in his confidence, or is it guess?'

'Guessing at first; but we had a very few words about it when he came home from consulting Dr. Lee last summer.'

'Then it was that wretched child that hurt his health?'

'So we thought. Dr. Lee asked him if there was not something on his mind.'

'The little wretch! Oh! if I had never asked her here! she has done more harm than she is worth!'

'He had got quite well,' said Cherry; 'and now he has his cough back again. O Mettie!'

'No,' said Wilmet, 'it is not *that* cough. It is only a chance cold; it is nearly gone. Besides, it cannot be the same as her first treason to him must have been.'

'That's true,' said Cherry, mournfully.

'After all,' said Wilmet, 'it *is* a happy escape for both our boys, if they can but feel it, poor fellows—but oh! to have been so deceived. And how ignorant one is—even living in the same house!' And Wilmet had a hearty fit of crying.

'And Edgar!' sighed Cherry.

'You must write. They all come to you, Cherry,' she added wistfully. 'You shall sit with dear Felix this evening, and I will keep the others away.'

This ordinance was carried out, but with no result as to conversation; for Felix's distress took the form of great tenderness as to the manner in which the blow was to fall upon Edgar. Nothing would satisfy him but Geraldine's writing immediately, under his own eye. Of course he ascribed all his own feelings to his brother; and though Cherry doubted, and could have written much better as from herself, she could but patiently write and re-write, when poor

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Felix found—as he did with everything that cost him consideration—that he was falling into his leading-article style; while all the time she saw him becoming more excited and flushed, till at last Wilmet came in, put an end to it, and sent her to bed, almost brokenhearted for both brothers, and struggling against her own hatred to the mischievous little witch who had played with their hearts.

She took care that the letter should go by the earliest post, partly to ensure Edgar's getting it without the Sunday's delay, but still more that it might not be within Felix's power to recall for two whole days. He just inquired after it, and finding it was gone, said no more. He was not so anxious to get up as the day before; his arm had come to a more painful stage, and he had had a feverish sleepless night; so that he looked so worn and depressed, that Mr. Rugg concluded that he had been imprudent, and scolded him accordingly.

When Geraldine came in to put the finishing strokes to the Pursuivant, she found him so silent and dreamy, that she did nearly the whole on her own responsibility; till at last he suddenly roused himself, begged her pardon, and gave his whole mind to the dictation of the political summary; then became dreamy again, and presently fell into a long sound sleep, after which he looked, even to the anxious eyes of his sisters, much better, and began to talk of getting up for the evening.

At about five o'clock, just as Wilmet was laying his things ready for him, the door was opened, and there entered first a perfume of tobacco, the next a lively voice—'What, Blunderbore, lying in state in Froggy's four-poster! Whom have you been getting into hot water with? Is there much the matter?' he added in a lower tone, as Wilmet kissed him.

'Not much,' said Felix; 'it is nothing but a scald in a disabling place on my arm.'

'The tea-kettle ought to know its friends better. I met Jem Bruce and heard of it, so I ran down to see how much of you was boiled. I looked into the shop, but Master Lance was too important to vouchsafe me a word. Are you sure it is only your arm, old fellow? you look baddish.'

'I'm well enough,' said Felix, shifting his head into the shadow

of the curtain; and Wilmet, perceiving that he wished to have it out at once, left them together. 'Edgar, do you know?' said Felix, earnestly.

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'You have not had Cherry's letter?'

'No. Don't torment yourself to beat about the bush. I'd stand anything rather than see you look like that.'

'Have you heard from Jersey?'

'Oh! It is that, is it? I believe it has lasted twelve calendar months, and that is as much as is reasonable to expect. Little humbugging puss! What has she taken up with?'

'Had you no idea that she had fallen in with—with a Frenchman?'

'The beggar! How far has it gone? or is it only a report from the old cats of aunts?'

'It is too certain.'

'Well, what is it? I suppose she hardly commissioned you to give me my *congé?*'

'I fear that she commissioned no one. Harsh treatment seems to have driven her to desperation. She was married privately, and has written from France to announce it.'

Edgar gave a long whistle, then turned round and laid his hand on his brother's, saying with a short laugh, 'Cool and easy! Well, it was pretty sport; and this conclusion is unique for simplicity and saving of trouble. Dear old Fee, here's that pulse of yours going like a young lady's in a field with a mad bull. Have you been working yourself up all day to expect me to hang myself, or shoot the frog-eater? Didn't I always tell you that only the ancient chivalry of the Pursuivant could take the affair *au grand sérieux?*'

'Very well,' said Felix in a somewhat smothered voice, 'it is your affair, and I must accept modern customs. I am glad you understood one another so well.'

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curling lip, but a tear in his softened eye, he stooped, pushed back the fair hair, and kissed the face which in its wistfulness looked younger than his own (having moreover the hirsuteness of only two days instead of two years).

Felix fulfilled his intention of getting up, though he went no farther than his own fire-side, where soon after tea he was joined by Clement, looking very serious, and armed with Bible, Prayer-book, and copy-book. He was to take Felix's Sunday class the next day; but whereas he had done so for the two months of the Ewmouth visit in the summer, there seemed no special necessity for a consultation, which in fact proved to be a rehearsal of the morrow's lesson, with various instructions to Felix himself, on what Clement called 'Church Teaching,' in oblivion that the simple truths of religion are as much Church teaching as the distinctive doctrines of his own set.

As vehement laughter pealed across the passage, Felix ventured to suggest that something was going on there.

'Yes,' said Clement; 'they were beginning some game, but I distrust Edgar's wit.'

'I don't think holding aloof always good.'

'When one's presence is a stimulus to irreverence?'

'Because you present yourself as a butt, instead of laughing with him, and giving things a turn.'

'Impossible, where one feels deeply.'

Felix believed it was impossible in the present case, and resigned himself, though pricking up his ears at the ripples of mirth and the shrieks of ecstatic uncontrollable laughter that reached his ear; until at last Lance burst in, laughing so that he could hardly stand upright, and bringing a paper in his hand for Felix's benefit.

It had been the game of adjectives, and Edgar, the conductor, had audaciously made its framework the Pursuivant's report of the valedictory sermon that Mr. Mowbray Smith was to preach on the morrow. It was a most comical combination, so well had Edgar's outline hit off the editor's desire to make the best of it, coupled with personalities that neither Mr. Smith would have preached nor he reported unless they had been in the palace of truth; the whole rendered the more grotesque by the hap-hazard adjectives that seasoned the discourse, sometimes deliciously inapposite, some-

times fantastically appropriate. An audience had stolen behind Lance to taste its sweets a second time; and the drollery, the *vraisemblance*, and touches of malice, quite choked him as he read, and overpowered Felix with mirth, all the more at the shocked countenance that Clement preserved throughout, while in the background there was a renewed chuckling, roaring, and rolling, at the more brilliant sallies.

The whole family had been viewing Edgar with more or less of awe, pity, and curiosity, as an injured hero, but had been beguiled into the maddest mirth, though as much disgusted with themselves for giggling as with him for making them giggle. Wilmet herself had succumbed, and Cherry had been in an almost hysterical transport of laughter, till her jaws ached, and her eyes were weak; and she was so exhausted that she could hardly crawl into Felix's room to wish him good-night, and then scarcely durst speak to him lest she should burst into tears; while as to the younger ones, it was altogether delightful to them at the moment, and they regarded the transactions of February as a dream.

When they met the next morning, Edgar professed that he could not venture on sitting under Mr. Smith's actual sermon, but should go to Minsterham, to pay his respects to Wilmet's future relations, if there were a feasible train.

'Yes,' said Clement, 'there's one in twenty minutes, which brings one in time for the Cathedral.'

'Dr. Wilmet is engrossed with a distinguished patient. Eh? Come along then, Lance; I must have some one to present me.'

Lance gave a joyful leap; but Wilmet interposed, 'Indeed, Lance, it is hardly safe. Remember how bad your head was after Christmas Day.'

'It's my own head, and I may do as I like with it!'

'That's just what you can't now. If you were knocked up to-morrow—as you certainly would be, between the railroad and the organ—'

'That would be what you *may* call a fix,' observed Edgar. 'Knocked up between a railway and an organ! What a position!'

'It is quite true, Edgar,' said Wilmet, the more severely for the laughter of Lance and Angel. 'Lance knows very well that one of his headaches perfectly disables him. Felix would not be content

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to leave Mr. Lamb alone in the shop; and all the good of these three days would be undone.'

'Oh—h! it was a pillar of the state I was asking?' said Edgar. 'Is your head really so ticklish, Lance?' as the boy made a gesture of disgust.

'Don't persuade him, Edgar. He ought not to do it,' said Wilmet, in her blunt authoritative way.

Lance kicked the heel of his boot against the floor, and said, 'Don't I pity Jack Harewood, that's all!'

'Well, a couple of ducks instead of a goose—Bob and Angel, you've no heads.—Come! I'm too modest to face the Librarian alone, much less the red-headed daughters.'

The two girls eagerly looked at their sister.

'"Gorgons and hydras and chimæras dire!"' ejaculated Edgar. 'If I were you, W. W., I'd get up a little more charitably disposed towards my brother on a Sunday morning!'

'It is Angela's wildness that I am afraid of,' said Wilmet.

'She sha'n't go near a tea-kettle,' said Edgar. 'Put on your hats, chickabiddies, if you wish to catch the Cathedral.'

'May we? O Wilmet, pray!' entreated Robina.

'I will see what Felix says.'

'A graceful form of shifting the obloquy of the negative,' muttered Edgar, as Wilmet disappeared.

'Felix will decide as he thinks good,' said Robina with dignity.

'As *she* thinks good, you mean,' said Edgar. 'Well, I wonder how you all contrive to stand it. I couldn't, I know, even for a quiet life.'

'You've not been broken in, you see,' said Lance, trying to answer with nonchalance.

'No, I only see a specimen occasionally. What has she been doing to you this morning, that has spoilt your appetite, and brought you under her thumb?'

'Don't, Edgar!' burst out Lance, starting up and running away.

'No, Edgar,' said Geraldine; 'it is not kind. It *is* hard enough for him as it is, and it is all for Felix's sake.'

Luckily, Clement had the wisdom not to speak, and therefore Cherry obtained a more reasonable answer.

'Well, that is a plea, Cherry; but it does rile me to see a fellow

like that dragooned over, and thrown away, to bolster up a wretched little business such as this. It's a mistake, depend upon it, to let the demon of present necessity engulf another of the best of us. My squibs are conscientious, I assure you.'

'I don't care for her!' exclaimed Bernard: 'I'll go with you whenever you please, Edgar!'

'Well, Wilmet, under what decent mask do you veil your stony heart?' asked Edgar, as she re-entered.

'Felix sees no reason against their going,' said Wilmet, rather gloomily. 'Only, Edgar, pray don't encourage Angela to get into one of her states. You don't know what they are.'

For Felix had decided it against her. 'Yes, let them go. I don't believe he can bear to face any one in the town, and the charge of them will be a safe-guard.'

'But Angela?'

'My dear, the worst that can happen with her is that she should be a little boisterous with the Harewoods;' and as Wilmet showed that the prospect was unpleasing, 'that is better than what he could do alone, or with Lance.'

'Yes, I was resolved to stop Lance. I don't know whether to tell you, but I think you ought to know.'

'What?' asked Felix anxiously.

'Last night at half-past eleven—just when I had finished your hand—I smelt smoke. So I went down to see what was on fire and—'

'You found Edgar smoking in the kitchen.'

'If it had been only Edgar, I should not have minded, but it was Lance too. I do think you ought to give him a warning, Felix, for they would do nothing but laugh at me. Edgar would only go into transports about my hair, and say how long it was. I don't think I was ever so nearly in a passion in my life! If he is teaching Lance those ways—'

'He is not Lance's first instructor in smoke,' said Felix; 'I believe your own Harewoods were that, Mettie.'

'Now you are laughing too, Felix! I don't know how you can. It seems to me that it is all up with us if Edgar is to lead away Lance; and Lance was not up this morning for Church—the first time I have known him miss.'

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'Well,' said Felix, rather hastily, 'it is of no use pulling reins too tight. Don't keep those poor children waiting, or you'll make them all too late.'

Wilmet had to obey, with the fretted sense that she had not been met as she expected, and that her alarms were injudiciously made light of; and Geraldine meantime tried to explain Edgar's bitter mischief as pain of heart; but it grieved her, whatever it was, and her spirits sank the more for the physical exhaustion of yesterday's violent laughter. But Edgar, looking in to see whether the little girls were ready, and finding her alone, leaning against the window disconsolately, came up, and putting his arm round her, said, 'So I scandalize you, Gerald? I can't give my carcase to be battened on by the ghools, were they the best family ghools in the world.'

'Edgar!'

'Besides, you know all this was diligently fostered by old Blunderbore's duteous intermeddling; and as it was not my fault that I furnished a spectacle for gods and men *then*, I *will* not now.'

'Only, Edgar, if you *do* care for Felix, do not, pray do not spoil his comfort in Lance!'

'If I don't, nature will, Cherry. That boy is not the stuff to make a journeyman stationer, at Wilmet's orders. Oh! if you could but have seen her, when she surprised us with our pipes last night! I couldn't get her to stand still, or she would have been a perfect study for Antigone. She is a magnificent creature with her hair down!—Ha! little kids, we must scamper for it for the train!'

And off he went, leaving Geraldine not much less unhappy for his apology. The long day alone with Felix was a better consolation. She could not leave the house in such cold as the present; and Felix was dressed as soon as breakfast was over, and came into the drawing-room, where after their home service, and when he had proved his freedom from cough by reading a grand sermon of Newman's, his reserve gave way in the Sunday calm, and he asked, 'Did Edgar say anything to you, Chérie?'

She repeated the saying about the ghools, as it was evidently meant for circulation among those respectable parties.

Felix smiled, and said, 'I thought so,' and told in return Edgar's defiant reception of the tidings.

'I don't think,' said Cherry, 'that I was ever more uncomfortable than through his fun. It felt like laughing-gas; it forced one on, and yet it was so unreal. He wants to treat it on the hawk-gone-down-the-wind principle.'

'It is the gallant and the wise one, Cherry. So you ought to admire it more than you seem to do.'

'It cannot be wise if it be not true. That is, if it ever went deep with him.'

'He never meant it to go deep,' said Felix; 'but the very extravagance of his defiance makes me afraid it took stronger hold than he knew, and that the shock may be very bad for him.'

'But she—' and Cherry stopped, afraid to vex him by speaking of Alice's incapacity to raise a character.

He calmly finished. 'She was not all we thought her. True, poor child; but an attachment worthily and steadily maintained, as for all his nonsense this has been, must be well for a man; and a disruption of this kind must be a breaking-up—whether he treat it lightly or no—of foundations such as one who seems to have little besides can ill afford to stand.'

It was the first time that the secret anxiety had been openly named, and Cherry clasped her hands.

'That is my chief anxiety,' resumed Felix. 'Otherwise the end of this matter is of course an advantage.'

'If she could use him so, she was not worth constancy,' said Cherry.

'No!' It was a decided No, though it was followed by 'As they had made her. Poor child! She was full of sweet womanly gifts, and might have been made everything excellent; but Edgar estimated her more truly than I did. There was always a certain spirit of intrigue, and want of substance, or she could never have so treated him.'

'Entirely unfeeling.'

'Or rather, too light to appreciate feeling otherwise than as a tribute to herself, or to dwell on the absent,' said Felix sadly. 'I now believe that she was conscious of—of my liking. Indeed, I am sure of it; I only tried to hope otherwise, though it was easy to forgive her preference for one so much more attractive. There was no harm in that. But as things stood with him, to throw him over

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Felix found—as he did with everything that cost him consideration—that he was falling into his leading-article style; while all the time she saw him becoming more excited and flushed, till at last Wilmet came in, put an end to it, and sent her to bed, almost brokenhearted for both brothers, and struggling against her own hatred to the mischievous little witch who had played with their hearts.

She took care that the letter should go by the earliest post, partly to ensure Edgar's getting it without the Sunday's delay, but still more that it might not be within Felix's power to recall for two whole days. He just inquired after it, and finding it was gone, said no more. He was not so anxious to get up as the day before; his arm had come to a more painful stage, and he had had a feverish sleepless night; so that he looked so worn and depressed, that Mr. Rugg concluded that he had been imprudent, and scolded him accordingly.

When Geraldine came in to put the finishing strokes to the Pursuivant, she found him so silent and dreamy, that she did nearly the whole on her own responsibility; till at last he suddenly roused himself, begged her pardon, and gave his whole mind to the dictation of the political summary; then became dreamy again, and presently fell into a long sound sleep, after which he looked, even to the anxious eyes of his sisters, much better, and began to talk of getting up for the evening.

At about five o'clock, just as Wilmet was laying his things ready for him, the door was opened, and there entered first a perfume of tobacco, the next a lively voice—'What, Blunderbore, lying in state in Froggy's four-poster! Whom have you been getting into hot water with? Is there much the matter?' he added in a lower tone, as Wilmet kissed him.

'Not much,' said Felix; 'it is nothing but a scald in a disabling place on my arm.'

'The tea-kettle ought to know its friends better. I met Jem Bruce and heard of it, so I ran down to see how much of you was boiled. I looked into the shop, but Master Lance was too important to vouchsafe me a word. Are you sure it is only your arm, old fellow? you look baddish.'

'I'm well enough,' said Felix, shifting his head into the shadow

of the curtain; and Wilmet, perceiving that he wished to have it out at once, left them together. 'Edgar, do you know?' said Felix, earnestly.

'I scent a crisis in the air, and am doubting whether the Pursuivant is up a tree, or Wilmet's engineer turned out no go.'

'You have not had Cherry's letter?'

'No. Don't torment yourself to beat about the bush. I'd stand anything rather than see you look like that.'

'Have you heard from Jersey?'

'Oh! It is that, is it? I believe it has lasted twelve calendar months, and that is as much as is reasonable to expect. Little humbugging puss! What has she taken up with?'

'Had you no idea that she had fallen in with—with a Frenchman?'

'The beggar! How far has it gone? or is it only a report from the old cats of aunts?'

'It is too certain.'

'Well, what is it? I suppose she hardly commissioned you to give me my *congé*?'

'I fear that she commissioned no one. Harsh treatment seems to have driven her to desperation. She was married privately, and has written from France to announce it.'

Edgar gave a long whistle, then turned round and laid his hand on his brother's, saying with a short laugh, 'Cool and easy! Well, it was pretty sport; and this conclusion is unique for simplicity and saving of trouble. Dear old Fee, here's that pulse of yours going like a young lady's in a field with a mad bull. Have you been working yourself up all day to expect me to hang myself, or shoot the frog-eater? Didn't I always tell you that only the ancient chivalry of the Pursuivant could take the affair *au grand sérieux*?'

'Very well,' said Felix in a somewhat smothered voice, 'it is your affair, and I must accept modern customs. I am glad you understood one another so well.'

'Spoken with grave irony worthy of the heavy father, your laudable model. Dear old chap, you'll be better now.'

There was something strange in the half-reverent, half-pitying tone of the tall powerful young man, as, with a sneer on his

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'Pshaw! that's not what I meant. He is not the stuff; you were the only one of us that had the making of a scholar. Now Lance has got just the taste and the talent that were baulked in my case by old Tom's sticking me down to hides and tallow, when I ought to have been cultivating them.'

'There's this difference,' said Geraldine; 'Cousin Thomas stuck you, but Lance sticks himself.'

'Under moral compulsion, eh?'

'The compulsion was on me,' said Felix. 'I was really afraid to deny him; the idleness, and the fretting over it, were doing his head so much harm.'

'That's all very well. No harm done; but to let him go on here in the stodge is a bit of short-sightedness I can't understand. He'll never be happy in it; and you'd better let him go before it is too late.'

'Go? but how, and where? His health is not fit for study, and his voice ought to rest for another year.'

Then Edgar explained his own plan. Lance had already considerable musical knowledge, and ability such that his way in the musical world would be secure. Amateur as he was himself, Edgar had such a footing there that he could secure an introduction for his brother, who while learning would be able to maintain himself; and either by violin or voice, if not by original composition, win name, fame, and fortune, in a few years. A manager of high reputation Edgar mentioned as likely to accept and train the boy; and he added that for his own part he would watch over the little fellow; and he added, with a look in his eyes that went to Felix's heart, 'And nothing would do me so much good *now* as the charge of him.'

'That I *do* believe, Edgar,' said Felix warmly; 'but it would be throwing the helve after the hatchet in a way you can't expect of a heavy father.'

'Exactly what I knew you would say. You veil it a little more; but we poor Bohemians don't meet with much more charity from you than from our stately sister. Reprobates all—eh?'

'Living a life of temptation enough to make me choose no one to be drawn into it that I can prevent. Have you been talking to Lance about it?'

'Well, it rose out of last night's talk to him. Not that he gave in to it. He's loyal to you to the back-bone, and all importance too with the charge of the shop. Besides, that cathedral—it's a sort of mother's milk to him, not out of his mouth.'

'That's a good hearing!' said Felix, with a rather defiant smile.

'But it won't last,' said Edgar; 'the drudgery and sameness will tell; and you'd better give in with a good grace in time, Blunderbore.'

'You've been persuading him,' said Cherry reproachfully.

'Well, Cherry, I'm not in the habit of confounding virtue with dulness; and when the little chap talked to me of the musical doings I had been after, I felt the sin and shame of getting a nightingale to make a barn-door fowl of.'

'I can only tell you,' said Felix, with more annoyance than he usually betrayed, 'that if you took your nightingale to the din of London, and the excitement of a concert, you'd have him with inflammation on the brain before the week was out. Why, I sent him over to see his doctor at Minsterham, and he says it would be murder to send him back to his books and the choir for this next quarter at least; and if cathedral music will not do for him, judge if London concerts would!'

'And did you think I wanted to carry off your deputy right hand while your own is hung up in a bag, you jealous old giant? Why, I proposed to devote myself to the Pursuivant to-morrow!'

'Thank you; I am afraid it would be taken for the Tribune.'

'As if I couldn't hit off the complacent, gentle, manly, stick-in-the-mud style for squiredom! I'll write you a leader—on what shall it be, municipalities, or the smut in wheat?—that you shall not know from your own.'

To wish Edgar away was impossible, and yet how feel willing that Lance should be under such influence? Withal there was the difficulty of shewing Wilmet that to fret Lance with restrictions was a dangerous thing at such a moment. She would yield to Felix's desire that she would not interfere with that orgie over the kitchen fire—which he regarded all the time with as much dread as herself—but she thought his concession weak: and Lance himself was perilously like Edgar in all his bright pleasant qualities, talents, and tastes, so that the two had an enjoyment in one another's company that it was painful to regard with anxiety.

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CHAPTER XXV.

DON GIOVANNI.

'Towered cities please us then,
And the busy hum of men.
* * * * *
And ever against eating cares
Lap me in soft Lydian airs.
* * * * *
With wanton heed, and giddy cunning,
The melting voice through mazes running.'

Milton.

THE Monday brought business instead of sentiment. Not only was the Pursuivant to be provided for, but Felix had on his mind the year's accounts. No one had ever had Froggatt and Underwood's Christmas bill later than the second week in January—and no one should. Besides, he was very anxious to balance his books this critical year, and was unwilling to employ a professional accountant for what, as far as head went, he could do perfectly well. His willing helpers began to perceive what they had never realized before—his practised power of quickness and accuracy. The Pursuivant was quite work enough for Cherry, even if she could have borne the strain of application to accounts; Lancelot was needed in the shop; and Wilmet and Clement found themselves whirled on beyond their power of speed. Robina proved the most efficient helper; for arithmetic had been so well taught by Miss Fennimore, that she understood with less trouble to herself and Felix than any of the rest. They laughed to find that five had been about what he usually did singly; and that he had all the time been the main-spring of them all—referee to Lance and Cherry, arranging for the others in pencil with his left hand, breaking off to direct one, verify for another, explain to the third, and often distracting them by whistling to Theodore, amusing Stella, or gossiping with Edgar—all with ease and without hurry, as if it came naturally to him. 'Julius Cæsar was nothing to him!' laughed Geraldine, as she perceived the ability and power that she had never ascribed to him before, because he had not Edgar's brilliance.

As to Edgar, though he had been trained for a merchant's clerk, he professed to have forgotten all his training: he would only proffer help to the editorial business, and there put out Cherry's arrangements more than he helped her; and finding every one much too busy to loiter, he took his departure early on Tuesday morning, leaving an unsatisfactory sense that he had not been comforted nor made welcome enough—a sense of regret and yet of relief.

The result of the balance was that the Pursuivant was a less profitable investment than hitherto, but by no means a loss; while the Tribune seemed to have reached a present level of circulation, where it might rest till some further excitement. There would henceforth be a hand-to-hand struggle; but the Pursuivant still held its own. And as to the private budget, the household *had* pulled through without exceeding their income, when all the demands of the year were answered. Moreover, Fulbert had been appointed to a well-paid office, and had sent home twenty-five pounds, begging that Lance might have the preference in the disposal; and the whole family were very proud of this, the first substantial help that had been sent in by any of the brothers—Lance proudest of all, perhaps, though he declared that it was no good to him, and begged that it might clear Bernard's first year.

Lance had said nothing all this time of Edgar's invitations, and no one was sure whether that unscrupulous person had made them to him in person or not, till one dismal foggy afternoon at the end of the week. Felix, though still helpless as to his hand and arm, had resumed his place down-stairs; and Cherry was sitting in the window, to get light to pursue her work of unpicking a dove-coloured French merino dress, a legacy of Alda's, which was to be dyed and made up again for Angela. It was a business that she disliked—it always seemed to bring the sense of grinding to her mind—and this particular dress seemed to carry in every fold the remembrance of some jar between the wearer and herself; nor was she exhilarated by the accompaniment, for Robina was dutifully puzzling out on the worn old piano a long difficult sonatina—a sort of holiday task, which lay heavy on the child's mind, and seemed to Cherry a mere labyrinth of confused sounds. The dull day, the dull work, and weary clash up to the place where Robina

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never failed to stumble, and then go back to the beginning with no better success, wore Cherry's spirits. She began to feel as if this were like her life—all mist, all toil, all din, everything fair and lovely closed up from her, nothing left but the yearning knowledge that it existed, and that everybody could enjoy it except herself—she, who felt such capacity for making the most of it. The sense of imprisoned tedium grew so strong at last, that she was ready to cry out to stop the only thing she could stop, when she was sensible that a very different hand was on the keys—no confused or uncertain touch, but the harmony was being read off, and the stammering spelling work was exchanged for clear, true, feeling discourse. She needed not to look round to know that Lance was standing behind Robina; but presently he came to a dull discordant note, and broke off with a growl of disgust, 'What, another gone!'

'Didn't you know that?'

'No; I can't bear to touch the wretched old thing, it makes me sick!'

'I wish we could learn to tune it.'

'Poulter did show me once, but it's no good. It is just as makeshift and disgusting as all the rest of it!'

'You've got a head-ache, Lance.'

'No, I haven't. Felix has been at me, too.'

'What! he sent you up?'

'Ay;' and as Robina sat down on a low stool, he threw himself on the floor, with his head on her lap, delivering himself of a howling yawn.

'Why did he send you up?' as she stroked his hair back from his temples.

'Oh, it has been an intolerable bother! All the samples of writing-paper have somehow been and gone and got into the wrong drawers, and Mr. Underwood has been in no end of a state of mind—quite ferocious; and Lamb and I have been sorting and struggling to get 'em right, till at last I didn't know fancy pink from widow's deepest affliction; and Felix, by way of the most cutting thing he could do to me, orders me up-stairs!'

'I am so sorry! It must have been Lamb's doing.'

'No: he's much too sober-sided. It was mine, I'm sure, one day when I was hating it all a little worse than usual.'

'Hating it all! O Lance! I thought you got on so well!'

'A nice sort of getting on! I know when it was. There were those two Miss Bayneses—out at Upham—came in with some fad about note-paper, made a monstrous fuss; but they are very pretty—something like that girl at Stoneborough. So I wrote up to Scott's—took no end of trouble. Scott had to cut it on purpose—wouldn't do less than a ream—and after all, when it came down, my young ladies just take one quire of it, turn everything over again, never say one word of thanks, but stand chattering away to an ape of a cousin that came in with them. I was in such a wax, that I believe I jumbled up the paper when they'd gone, and tumbled it all over again; and it has never got the better of it, though I always meant to set it to rights.'

'Well, I think it served you right, if you only did it because they were pretty!'

'It wasn't altogether that; but I knew they would say nothing was to be had when Mr. Underwood wasn't there. That's the way of it; one's just a bit of a machine for getting things!'

'You knew that before, when you took the work.'

'Yes; but somehow I did not know it would be so disgusting. I don't suppose that girl at Stoneborough would look at me over the counter now. No, and I don't know that she ought, either; only people might have a civil "Thank you" to throw at one. I'm an ass, that's all! Only one hates having no one to speak to!'

'It is different from the Harewoods.'

'Don't talk about that!'

'But, Lance, I thought you liked it all. You said you did when I came home; and when Felix was laid up, you were everything, and did so well. I thought you would have been pleased.'

'Yes; I saw the whole stupidity and botheration of the thing. It has got to be work instead of play—I suppose that's it.'

'But, Lance, does it follow that you must go on with it all your life, because you are helping Felix through this winter?'

'While the accounts look like this, I don't see how he is to pay a stuck-up shopman. No, it is all stuff and nonsense! I didn't think Edgar's talk would have upset me like this.'

'What? his talk about operas, and concerts, and pictures—?'

'And the spirit and the fun that are always going there. That

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must be life! One's eyes and ears do seem given one for something there! Do you know Bob, he wants me to come up and live with him, and get an engagement as a pianist, and learn the violin?'

'O, Lance! but Felix and Wilmet would never consent!'

'No, and they didn't ought to. No, I could never,' and he spoke low, but Cherry heard his clear voice distinctly, 'give the stage what was taught me for that other purpose. If I can't be what I want, I must do this common work for my living, and not make a market of my music. I can *give* that freely to the Church —that is if I ever get my voice again.'

'That's right, dear Lancey,' said Robina, looking down at the face on her knees; 'you could not really like that odd life Edgar leads.'

'Like it? Much you know about it, Bob. It does make everything else seem as dull as ditch-water!'

'Not always.'

'Not when I can get it out of my head. Only I do wish things wouldn't be so stupid here. It's just like a horse in a mill seeing a fine thorough-bred come and kick up his heels at him in a meadow. I say, Bob, let's go and get a turn at the organ—you can blow for me; it will get the maggots out of my brain best.'

'Oh yes, dear Lance, only—'

Only what?'

'If you didn't much mind those horrible notes, could you just shew me the sense of that thing? I must learn before I go back to school; and Angel hates it so, I did it when she was out.'

Lance made an ineffable grimace; but having undertaken to act music-master, he first played the piece as exquisitely as the cracked piano would allow, and then scolded poor Robin within an inch of her life at every blunder, for her utter lack of taste, vituperating the stupidity of those who threw good music away upon her.

She took it all as an honour and a kindness, though she cried out for a respite long before she had come up to his rather unreasonable requirements; and reminding him that it would soon be too dark for his designs on the church organ, she went to get ready; and the two were not seen again till after dark, when the patient Robina came in very cold, but there was a bright peacefulness on Lance's face, as if he had played away his repinings.

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Felix explained the having sent him away by saying that the strain of the days when he had been in charge had told on him, for he had grown so confused and distressed in the endeavour to remedy the mistakes that had been made, that it had been needful for every reason to send him away from the scene of action. No doubt the responsibility, and the resistance to Edgar's invitations had been a considerable pressure on his mind; but whatever his longings might be, he said no more about them, and continued to be the sunshine of the house—so bright, frank, and open that no one would have guessed at the deep reserves within.

It was about a month later that one evening he darted into the room, exclaiming, 'I *say*, who do you think is here? Why, Renville, Edgar's boss!'

'Nothing the matter, I hope?' cried Cherry.

'Oh no, nothing; only Tom Underwood has sent him down to see about some picture at Centry, and so he dropped in, and Felix has asked him to spend the evening.'

'The evening!' Wilmet started up.

'Hark! there they are on the stairs!'

The introduction was deferred, for Felix shut him into Mr. Froggatt's room, and then came himself to say, 'I couldn't but ask him; I hope it is not *very* troublesome?'

'N—no—oh, no,' said Wilmet. 'Only—Lance, should you mind just running down to Prothero's to get some rashers; and let me see—eggs, if he has any he can recommend, and not above sixpence for seven?'

'Little Lightfoot is there,' said Felix, who even in his shoe-cleaning days would not have liked such a commission.

'He has no sense,' returned Wilmet; 'and I can't spare one of the maids. You don't mind, Lance?'

'Not a whistle. Only how is my sense to act, if Prothero's conscience won't warrant his eggs?'

Wilmet's answer was lost in the clank of coppers, as she left the room with her willing *aide-de-camp*, and neither of them was seen again for the next half hour, during which time Felix had introduced the neat dapper little Mr. Renville to his sister Geraldine and little Stella; and a conversation had begun which entertained Cherry extremely—it was so like a breath from that wonderful world of

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art in which Edgar lived; and meantime the painter's quick eye was evidently taking stock of the drawings on the walls, and feasting, on little Stella's childish beauty, though he was too polite to make remarks. There had been only just time for Felix and Cherry to look at each other, wondering what their house-keeper designed, when the door between the rooms was opened by Lance, with a face as red as a boiled lobster: and behind the tea-tray appeared Wilmet's head, likewise considerable heightened in complexion, though not so unbecomingly. Nor had they roasted themselves for nothing. Lance looked and winked with conscious pride at the poached eggs, frizzled contorted rashers, and crisp toast, wherein he had had his share of glory; and Wilmet's pile of scones in their snowy napkin divided the honours of the feast with the rissoles, previously provided for the brothers, who since Felix's health had become matter of thought, had come to make their principal meal in the leisure of the evening, when that notable housewife of theirs could provide for them.

Certainly, Mr. Renville's own Nuremburg haus-frau could not have turned out a neater little impromptu supper than Wilmet had done; though she had decidedly objected to Lance's concealment of the uncouth forms of the butter with fern-leaves from the garden, and had flatly refused to let him station either a pot of jonquils or a glass of snowdrops in the middle of the table. 'Eating, was eating, and flowers were flowers,' she said; which sentiment somehow tickled Lance so much, that choking added to the redness of his visage, as, while buttering the muffins, he tried to exercise some sculpture on the ill-shaped lump.

To a Londoner, however, all country fare was fresh, pure, and delicious, more especially when dispensed by one who, for all her disdain of the poetry of life, could not but be in herself a satisfaction to the artist's eye. He could not help a little start of amazement; and as he paused while Cherry made her slow way into the other room, he could not refrain from whispering to Felix that he had always thought the portraits Edgar brought from home a little too ideal, but that he perceived that they did not do justice to the reality; and Felix, with a little curl of his mouth, and rub of his hands, asked whether Mr. Renville had seen his other twin sister. 'Yes; she was extremely handsome, but some-

how her style did not explain that classical beauty in the same manner.'

To look at Wilmet and Stella, and to talk to Felix and Geraldine, was no despicable pleasure. Felix's powers of conversation were a good deal cultivated by the clients of the reading-room, who had always gossiped with Mr. Froggatt as now with him; and Geraldine had native wit and liveliness, that were sure to flash out whenever the first chill of shyness was taken off, as it easily was when her brother was there to take the lead.

But Cherry was not prepared for that proposal of Felix's that she should show her drawings to the guest. Poor man, he must be so much used to the sight of young-lady drawings; and of late Cherry had been in the depths of despair about hers, with all their defects, that she knew not how to remedy, glaring full upon her. She would have protested, but Lance had handed out the portfolio; and fluttering, nervous, eager, she must conquer her silly sense of being 'all in a twitter.'

Those two or three fanciful groups—his 'Ah, very pretty!' was just courteous and almost weary. But then came an endeavour to produce Lance as the faithful little acolyte in the Silver Store. Mr. Renville looked at that much more attentively, smiled as he nodded at her model, and praised the accuracy of the drawing of the hand. From that moment his manner of looking was altogether different. He criticised so hard that Wilmet was in pain, and thought poor Cherry would be annihilated; but Cherry, on the other hand, was drinking in every word, asking questions, explaining difficulties, and Mr. Renville evidently extremely interested, seeing and hearing nothing but the sketches and the lame girl.

'Who had been her teacher?'

'Edgar.'

'No one else? Only your brother?' in great surprise. 'I don't know when I have seen such accuracy even in the school of art.'

'Edgar is so particular about that.'

'Well, if I could only get him to learn his own lesson!'

'I have so little to copy,' said Cherry. 'I have nothing to distract me.'

It was little enough; a few second-hand studies of his; a cast

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that Felix had given her off an Italian boy's board, which came opportunely on her birth-day; and her living models when she could catch them, generally surreptitiously. But upon her small materials she had worked perseveringly, going back to the same subject whenever she gained a new light, profiting by every hint, till the result was an evident amazement to the artist; and as he emphatically said, pointing to an outline caught from John Harewood as he was reading last summer, 'This is not talent, it is genius! You ought to give yourself advantages, Miss Underwood.'

Cherry smiled rather sadly. 'It is quite enough that Edgar should have them,' she said.

'Ah! if he would only take half the pains with his drawing that he seems to have inculcated upon you!'

It was a disappointment. She had much rather have heard Edgar's genius praised than her own, which, be it what it might, she had come to believe must, for want of cultivation, be limited to the supply of Christmas cards and unsatisfactory illuminations.

But when the sisters had gone to bed, Mr. Renville had much more to say. He had sought Felix out a good deal for the purpose of talking over Edgar. He said that the young man's talent was of a graceful, fantastic, ingenious description, such as with application would be available for prosperity if not for eminence; but application Edgar had never perseveringly given, since he had first found himself surpassed in the higher efforts of art. His powers were too versatile for his own good, and he dabbled in everything that was *not* his proper occupation—concerts, amateur theatricals, periodical literature and journalism, comic sketches. His doings were not all wholly unremunerative; but though he viewed them as mines of wealth, they were really lures into a shifty uncertain life, and distractions from steady consistent labour. His fine voice, his brilliant wit, and engaging manner, made him a star in the lively society on the outskirts of art; and he was expensive, careless, and irregular in his hours to a degree that sorely tried the good man, a precisian in his domestic customs. He and his little German wife, however, loved the lad, as everybody did love him who came under the influence of his sunshiny grace and sweetness of temper—the unselfish manner inherited from one whose unselfishness was real; and used as they were to the freedom of

artist life, their allowances were liberal; but of late there had been a recklessness and want of purpose about his ways which both grieved and alarmed them: he was more unsettled than ever, seemed to have lost all interest in his studies at the Academy, was getting into a set that had degenerated from permissible eccentricity into something very like lawlessness, and even while an undesirable inmate, had vexed his kind friend and master by proposing to remove from under his roof, and set up with a chosen comrade of his own.

Committed to his charge, as Edgar Underwood had been by the elder brother, the kind little artist felt it his duty not to let him go without an intimation to his family, though well aware that a father could have little control in such a case, how much less a brother only by two years the elder?

All that Felix could hope was, that since this state of dreary recklessness was so evidently the effect of disappointment, it might pass with the force of the shock. He himself had experiences of the irksomeness of the dull round of ordinary occupation when the heart was rent by a sudden shock; and though he had forced himself on under the load that had so nearly crushed him, he could perfectly understand the less chastened, more impetuous nature, under less pressure of necessity, breaking into aberrations under a far more astounding blow of desertion. So he hoped. But what could he do? He knew but too well the cool manner in which Edgar turned over his remonstrances as those of the would-be heavy father. He could only thank Mr. Renville, promise to write to Edgar, and entreat him not to remove from the roof which was so great a safeguard against the worst forms of temptation, advise him perhaps to study abroad for a time to pacify the restlessness of his disappointment—at any rate, if he could do nothing else, not let the brother whom he still loved best of all drift away without feeling that there were those who grieved and strove for him.

It was not only of Edgar that Mr. Renville spoke, however. He was so much impressed with Geraldine's drawings, that he argued that she should have a quarter's study in the South Kensington Museum, undertaking, as one of the masters, to facilitate her coming and going, so that she should not be involved

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in any scrambles, and declaring that she only needed a few opportunities of study to render her talent really excellent and profitable.

Felix declared her going to be simply impossible; but either Mr. Renville or Edgar did not let the matter rest there, for a warm invitation arrived from the family in Kensington Palace Gardens, backed by many promises of tender care from Marilda. It seemed to be absolutely throwing away opportunities for Cherry to refuse to avail herself of such an opening; and though she was in exceeding trepidation, she had enough of the sacred fire to long to perfect her art, justified by the wish to render it substantially beneficial. And then Felix could not help thinking that the presence of his favourite sister might be a wholesome check to Edgar in one direction, and incentive in another, at this critical time, and this was no small weight in his balance. While Cherry, on the one hand, dreaded going out into the world with the nervous dismay of an invalid, who had never been anywhere but to St. Faith's; and on the other, felt this opportunity for herself almost an injustice to Lance, with all his yearnings.

She was to go immediately after Easter; and whether by Edgar's suggestion or not, Marilda imperiously begged that Lance might bring her up to London, and stay as long as he could be spared. It was impossible to give him longer than from Saturday till the last train on Monday, for Felix had reporting business on hand, and must be out on Tuesday, and did not perhaps regret that things had so settled themselves.

Lance's overflowing enjoyment somewhat solaced Geraldine's alarm on the way up; he was so careful of her, and so proud of the charge; and after his wistful glance at Minsterham, the novelty was so delightful to him. His journey with John Harewood reckoned for nothing, for he had then been far too unwell to look about, and it had besides been on a different line; but now everything was wonderful, and his exclamations almost embarrassed Cherry, she thought they must so astonish their fellow-travellers. Even the hideousness of the suburbs seemed to fascinate him—there was something in the sense of the multitude that filled him with excitement. 'It is getting to the heart, Cherry,' he said, 'where the circulation is quickest.'

'Into the world—the vortex, I should call it,' returned Cherry thinking of drops being attracted by the eddy, and sucked into the whirlpool; but Lance was gone wild at the glimpse of a huge gasometer, and did not heed.

Edgar's dainty beard and moustache were the first things that met their eyes upon the platform; his strong arms helped Cherry out, and in a wonderfully short time seated her beside Alda in a great luxurious carriage.

To her disappointment, however, the two back seats remained vacant.

'No, no,' said Edgar, his white teeth gleaming in a smile; 'we must make the most of our time, Lancey boy. What do you say to walking by Westminster—then we'll get something to eat—and you shall know what Don Giovanni is like before you are many hours older, my boy?'

Cherry's last view of Lance was with a look of dancing ecstasy all over his person.

'Don Giovanni is the opera, isn't it?' she said in bewilderment.

'Of course; what did you think?'

'But I thought that was dreadfully dear.'

'Oh! Edgar can always get tickets for anything. You must not bring out Wilmet's frugalities here, Cherry. Dear old Wilmet, how does she bear this long waiting?'

Alda was really interested in home tidings, and pleased to point out matters of interest, so that Cherry was fairly happy, till the awe of the great handsome house, alone in its gravelled garden, fell on her.

But when once up the stately stone steps, she was kindly, solicitously, welcomed by Marilda and her mother. The reception-rooms (as Mrs. Underwood called them) were all on the ground floor; and Cherry had only to mount one easy flight of broad steps to reach the former school-room, with two little bed-rooms opening into it—one assigned to her, the other to Marilda's old nurse, who had been kept on with little or nothing to do, and was delighted to devote herself to the lame young lady.

She took charge of Geraldine's toilette for the late dinner, so tremendous to the imagination used to the little back-room at home, but which turned out after all more tedious than formidable. In truth, Cherry was very tired, and Alda quite kindly advised her to

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go to bed. She wanted to sit up and wait for her brothers, but was laughed at, and finally was deposited in her very pretty pink bed, where, however, the strangeness of all things allowed her very little sleep. Quiet as the place was, she thought something seemed to be going on all night; and at some semi-light hour in the morning she bounded up as if at a shot, for there really was a step, and a knock, and her door opening.

'Cherry, are you awake?'

'O Lance! what is the matter?'

'Matter! nothing—only I'm going out to look about me, and I thought I'd leave word with you and see how you were.'

'Out! Why, didn't I hear the clock strike five?'

'Ay. Have you been awake?'

'A good deal. Have you?'

'As if anybody could sleep after that! I've gone it all over and over. I see there's a piano in this outer room. I'll just show you.'

'O Lance!—*now*—and Sunday!'

'I forgot. But it is so awful, Cherry: it made one feel more than a hundred sermons;' and the far-away look came into his eyes; as in rapid words he sketched the story, described the scenes, dwelt with passionate fervour on the music, all with an intensity of feeling resulting in a great sense of awe. His excitement seemed to her so great that she begged him to go back to bed for the hours that yet remained before breakfast.

'I couldn't, I tell you, Cherry.'

'But you'll have *such* a head-ache.'

'Time enough for that when I get home. I don't know what to do with myself, I tell you; I must get into a church somewhere, or I can't bear it.'

'You'll lose your way.'

'I've got the map of London. If I can I shall get to St. Matthew's; and so I thought I had better tell you, in case I wasn't back to breakfast. Edgar shewed me your room.'

'Is Edgar sleeping here?'

'No; he went to Renville's when he'd put me in. I'll be back anyway by the time Robin and Angel come, but I can't stay quiet. Nobody ever gave meany notion what this place is. It makes one

feel I don't know how, only just to see the people—streaming, streaming, streaming, just like a river! And then that wonderful —most wonderful music!'

The boy was gone, and Cherry felt as if his fate were sealed—the drop gone to join the other drops, and to swirl away!

Edgar was rather amazed and disconcerted, when on coming in about ten o'clock he found that he had vanished. He had meant to take him to any ecclesiastical wonder that he wished; but he laughed at Cherry's fears of the boy losing himself. 'He is a born gamin,' he said—'takes to London streets as a native element. But Felix is right, he must not have too much of it. I was heartily glad when it was over last night, and durst not keep him for the ballet, though I much wanted to see what he would say to it; but he was worked up to such a pitch I didn't know what would come next, and I'm sure his remarks taught me more about Don Giovanni than ever I saw before. He was in such a state when he came out that I hardly knew what to do with him. I should have given him a glass of ale but he wouldn't hear of that, so I could only let him have his will—a great cup of coffee—and send him to bed. I knew he wouldn't sleep.'

Lance *did* appear at the moment of luncheon, when Robina and Angela arrived to spend the rest of the day. He had not reached St. Matthew's; but he had found a church open early for a grand choral Celebration, and this not being customary at Minsterham, had been almost overwhelming to a nature like his. It had lasted so long, that the bell rang for matins before the congregation had left the church; and Lance had stayed on, and heard a service far exceeding in warmth and splendour that of his sober old cathedral, and such a soul-stirring sermon as was utterly unlike the steady-going discourses of his canons.

He had never even missed his breakfast, and yet seemed not to care for the meal before him, though he ate what was put on his plate; and he had that look of being all brow, eyes, and nose, that had often recurred ever since his illness; but he would not allow that he was tired; and so far from being able to sit still, wanted his little sisters to walk with him in Kensington Gardens, and Robina being a discreet person, and knowing her way, there was no reason against this; and off they went, all three supremely

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happy, and Cherry feeling a certain hopefulness that Robina's steady good sense would be a counterpoise to other influences and excitements. But Lance had not come to any state for sober sense. Under the trees of Kensington Gardens, the influence of the brilliant spring beauty, and the gay cheerful vivacity of the holiday crowd, still acted on his eager self; and he used his sisters as audience for all his impressions as to Don Giovanni, till he had driven Angela almost as wild as himself with his vivid descriptions—and to be sure, he treated it as a sort of religious exercise. Indeed, the sensation he seemed chiefly to have carried off with him, was that London had been maligned; he had always supposed it to be a Vanity Fair, where one's religion would be in extreme peril; and behold, he had found religion there like everything else—more quickening, more inspiriting, more exquisitely beautiful and satisfying in its ministrations, than anything that he could have conceived! Nor did the late Evening Service with which his day finished—with all its accessories of light and music, and another sermon from a celebrated preacher—lessen this impression, which made St. Oswald's by comparison so utterly flat, dead, and unprofitable.

Robina could not help saying to Cherry, with that old-womanish air of wisdom that belonged to her sometimes, 'I do wish we hadn't taken Lance to such a nice church. He knows less what London really is now than he did before.'

Dear little Robin! as if she knew what London *really* was! And Cherry was too anxious an elder sister to give her much comfort, except by saying, 'It is fair that he should know the truth of what is to be found there, Bobbie. You see he is only getting good out of it in his own mind.'

'Yes, that's true; only he will make himself ill.'

This had come to be Edgar's fear as well as Cherry's, when they found that Lance had slept quite as little the second night as the first, though he brought down those great lustrous blue eyes of his quite as wide open and full of zest in the morning. It made Edgar cautious in his choice of sights for the Monday; but one so long habituated to London, and regarding with contempt its stock lions, could not estimate what they were to a lad at once so susceptible and so unsophisticated, and his diversion at Lance's raptures passed

into anxiety, not unmingled with tedium, and almost disdain, at anything so very countrified; but his real care and good nature never flagged till he had safely, and to his positive relief, seen his little brother off for Bexley by the five o'clock train, to work off his intoxication at home, among his proper guardians.

'I am sure,' he said to Geraldine, 'if I had had any notion that his brain had continued so ticklish, I would never have had him on my hands. The difference between lionizing him and old Blunderbore! why it was—not exactly fire and water, but Ariel and Gonzalo. Shut the two up in the same shop! It is ridiculous! No, no, Lance must vegetate down there till his brains have cooled down from that unlucky stroke; but after that, you'll see, nothing will keep him down in Felix's hole; 'tisn't in the nature of things that he should be buried there. I've given him the violin I got at Liège, so he won't be quite wasting his time.'

There was rest—at least, for the present—in Edgar's acquiescence in Lance's vegetation, except so far as it gave food for present anxiety, by showing how the boy's excitability had alarmed him; and Cherry anxiously watched for reports from home. Felix and she herself were the chief letter-writters in the family, and he kept her daily supplied with tidings. His first account—written at intervals at the reporter's table at Minsterham—bore that Lance had come all right, and seemed to have enjoyed himself much. So he had kept up for one day; but on the third came the inevitable tidings, 'Poor Lance is in bed, with headache in its worst shape. Wilmet has been obliged to stay at home to attend to him. It must have been coming on yesterday, for he seems to have talked more than enough, and made more blunders than can be remedied in a day. I suppose Edgar would have laughed if I had cautioned him; but I would about as soon have put the boy to stand on the Equator as have taken him to that opera.'

The days of pleasure seemed to have a heavy price; it was not till Saturday that Felix reported Lance as in his place as usual, but still looking ill, quiet, and subdued. 'I am afraid,' proceeded the letter, 'that it has been a very fascinating glimpse he has had of Edgar's way of life, and that F. and U.'s house is more against the grain to him. I doubt whether it be suited to

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him; but the other course seems over-perilous. I wonder whether fathers have the power of insight and judgment that I need so much. However, for the present, health speaks plainly that home is the only place for him; and I can with a free conscience enjoy his bright face and service of good will. To have you and him both out of the way *was* severe; but if it were not for his good, it is for yours.'

Yes, Geraldine trusted it was for her good. When Thomas Underwood went to the City in the morning she was always set down at the Renvilles', whence the transit to the Museum was so short, that she could make it either with her brother's arm or the master's. It was not thought fit for her to work all day, so Mrs. Sturt (the old nurse) always came to meet and take her home to luncheon; after which she either went out with Mrs. Underwood and Marilda, or was carried about by her brother, in which case her conveyance was always defrayed at the door with so little knowledge on her part, that Edgar accused her of supposing Cousin Thomas to keep innumerable very seedy equipages always in waiting on her steps.

It was great enjoyment—real instruction of the best sort in that which was most congenial to her, putting the crown on her long lonely perseverance, and giving a daily sense of progress and achievement, was delightful. She had no notion of rivalry; but when she perceived that she was excelling, that commendation almost always attended her attempts, and that in any competition she always came near the mark and was sometimes foremost, she was conscious of a startling sense of triumph; and Edgar was full of exultation. If his own studies at the Royal Academy had been fulfilling all his golden dreams, he could not have been half so uplifted as he was by Cherry's chances of a medal; while, if he had only acted on a quarter of the sensible advice he gave her, he would already have been far advanced in his profession.

If he had been imprudent in Lancelot's case, he showed much tender good judgment in his selection on Cherry's behalf of exhibitions and rehearsals—never overdoing her, and using all his grace and dexterity to obviate her fatigue and prevent embarrassments from her lameness, till she began to take courage and feel at ease.

Alda never went with them. She said Cherry's pace would be the death of her, and she knew it all by heart. Yet, go where they would, there generally appeared, soon after four o'clock, a tall, handsome, black-moustached figure, seldom uttering more than 'Good-morning!' and 'All well at home?' and then content to stalk beside them, perfectly indifferent to their object, but always ready to give an arm to Cherry, or to find a cab.

'Dogged by Montezuma's ghost!' Edgar would mutter when the inevitable black head came towering into view; and even Cherry sometimes felt the silent haunting rather a bore. Edgar and Ferdinand were both good company alone, but together she knew not what to do with them; since her sole common subject of interest to Ferdinand, church details, provoked Edgar's sarcasm; and though Edgar had enough to say on a thousand other points, Fernan was totally silent on all, except horses, of which on her side she knew nothing. Nevertheless, for very pity, he was always allowed to know their designs; and Cherry delivered messages between him and Alda, and marvelled at her never finding it possible to avail herself of such chances of meeting.

Indeed, it puzzled Cherry why Ferdinand should be banished from the house, since Marilda took pains to mark her friendly feeling towards him as Alda's betrothed; and the resentment of her parents appeared to be inactive; but Alda declared that any advance on his side would provoke great wrath, and that open intercourse was impossible; and it could only be supposed that she was the best judge.

However, to Cherry herself, Alda was far kinder than at home —perhaps because her own ground was too secure to leave room for jealousy; and she viewed her sister as guest rather than rival. During the first shyness and awe, she was a kind helper, full of tact, which parried the rather obtrusive patronage of her so-called aunt; she provided books, quietly ameliorated matters of dress, and threw in judicious hints and encouragements, so that Cherry's warm heart beat gratefully, and she thought she had never known how nice Alda could be in her proper element.

As to Marilda, she was thoroughly good-natured, perhaps rather teasing, and tyrannical as to what she thought for Cherry's good, and very careful that she should not be neglected; but there did

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not seem to be much in common between them, they never could get on in a *tête à tête;* and Cherry, who had heard vast statements from her brothers about Marilda's original forms of goodness, was disappointed to find her life so entirely that of a common-place young lady. She was clumsy, over-dressed, and of a coarse complexion; and though she sometimes said odd things, they were remarkable not for wit but for frankness. It seemed as though the world had been too much for Marilda's better self, and as if she were becoming the purse-proud heiress who fancied wealth could atone for want of refinement or of delicacy towards people's feelings.

It was with the master of the house that Cherry got on best. At first he treated her like a frail china cup that a touch might break, but gradually he discovered in her resemblances to all manner of past Underwoods, talked to her about her parents in their youth, expressed endless wonder how 'that lad Felix made it out,' and by-and-by found that a few questions about the day's doings would draw forth a delightfully fresh, simple, and amusing narrative, given with animated lips, and eyes that charmed him. He became very fond of little Geraldine, and accepted her as his special evening companion when his wife took the other two girls into society. She could talk, read the paper, or play at cribbage; and was so much pleased to be of use, that she became as much at ease and therefore as amusing as with old Froggy himself.

She had been assured of exemption from parties, but she found that the sumptuous luncheon was a popular institution, and that radiant ladies, lounging men, riding parties brought home by Alda, and stout matrons on a cruise of morning calls, were always dropping in. It was diverting to sit quietly by and listen to the characteristic confidences of the city dames, to the dashing nonsense of the girls, and the languid affectations of the young men; and capital material was furnished for the long letters that amused the breakfast-table at home—journals, half full of beautiful description, half full of fun and drollery. Those gay dames and demoiselles little thought what a pair of keen grey eyes were watching them, as they passed, almost unheeded, the little sober-hued person whom they never fairly understood to be the sister of the beautiful Alda.

Of the school establishment at Brompton Cherry saw something. She was invited to drink tea there, for the sake of talking over

Angela; the two heads of the establishment being very glad to get an elder sister to discuss that puzzling personage with. Of Robina, since the catastrophe eighteen months ago, they had nothing but good to say; she had really lived it down, so far as to have proved that if she had erred, it was only in judgment; but with Angela they still knew not what to do.

She had come back subdued and with better impulses, and these had carried her on up to Easter, giving such satisfaction to the Vicar, that he had sanctioned her Confirmation; but immediately after the holidays, the wild spirit had broken out again. She neither learnt nor tried to learn, attended to nothing but music, and showed up exercises and dictation flagrantly ill-spelt, and not unfrequently making fun of the whole subject. As a reward for her weeks of propriety, she had been promoted to the German class; but she had openly declared that she hated German, and saw no use in it, and she would not attempt anything but an occasional caricature of pronunciation. Everybody liked her—even those whom she most disrespectfully provoked; and she was like a kind of tame monkey to the school, turning her very punishments into absurdity. She would lighten solitary confinement by fantastically decorating the chairs and tables. If shut up in the dark, her clear shrill voice would convulse all the household with Lance's whole repertory of comic songs, the favourite being Thackeray's 'Little Billee,' which she always sang as if she expected to be rescued by the sight of 'Admiral Nelson, K.C.B.,' if not made 'Captain of a Seventy-three!' and even impositions she always managed to make ludicrous, by comments, translations, or illustrations, bringing them up with a certain irresistible innocence and simplicity of countenance. What was to be done? No, they did not want her to be taken away; she was a bright dear girl, with a great deal of good in her—very warm-hearted, and certainly devout; and Miss Fennimore confessed that she should be very sorry to part with her, or to confess herself beaten in the struggle. 'Your name is Geraldine?' she asked, suddenly; 'are you Irish?'

'My grandmother was.'

'That accounts for it!'

'She must have absorbed all the Irish nature in the family, then,' said Cherry, laughing,

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'Perhaps. But it throws a light on it. I don't know which is the most curious subject, national or family character.'

Of course Cherry was set to talk to Angela—an operation that she hated almost as much as Felix did; and the result of which attempt was this, 'Now don't—don't, Cherry!'—hugging her round the neck; 'you never were made for scolding, and it is no use spoiling your own pleasure and mine! Leave it to Wilmet; she does it with dignity, you know!'

'But, Angel, I do really want to understand why you are so set against German?'

'It's a nasty crack-jaw language, that all the infidels write their books in.'

'I only wish they did!' murmured Cherry.

'And it's the Protestant language, too; and that's *worse*,' persisted Angela. 'No, I won't learn it on principle.'

'I thought principle was to do what one was told.'

'That depends. Now, German will never be of use to me; I'm not going to be a governess, and I sha'n't qualify myself for it!'

'Yes, Angel, I know what you mean; but isn't obedience the qualification you must learn—if you are to come to the other thing?'

'I shall learn it fast enough when the time comes. Don't you know, Cherry, a republic is much better preparation for despotism than one of your shilly-shally rational limited monarchies?'

'That may be true,' said Cherry; 'but you know I think the rational loyalty the most wholesome training.'

'Yes, I know. Family life suits you; but I must have the—the real religious life or none. I don't like secularity.'

'O Angel, you are much worse with these fine words that deceive you, when you are really and truly only a naughty idle child!'

'That's true, Cherry; and yet it is not true,' said Angela, thoughtfully. 'I am a naughty idle child, and yet I am more.'

'How is it—after this Confirmation and all?'

'Ah!' said Angel, frankly. 'I thought it would have done me good and made me different; but instead there's just one anticipation gone, and nothing to look to.'

'Not your own possible future?' (Cherry knew of it, though not Wilmet.)

'That's such a dreadful way off! No, if you all *will* keep me

in the world, I must have my fun! Come, Cherry, don't look so horribly vexed! I'll tell you what, if you'll cheer up, I won't have another flare-up with old Fen as long as you are here to be bullied about it!'

And she kept her word so faithfully, that the two ladies thought that charming little elder sister had had a great effect upon their troublesome charge.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TRANSMUTATION.

'Affection follows Fortune's wheels,
And soon is shaken from her heels;
For, following beauty or estate,
Her loving soon is turned to hate.'
Sir Walter Raleigh.

Do you remember,' wrote Cherry, 'poor Fernan's old rival in the Life Guards, Sir Adrian Vanderkist? I have seen him! He descended upon us at luncheon-time in all his glory; and Mrs. Underwood was like Eve entertaining the Angel. I hope that is not profane! it is only Paradise Lost. I don't comprehend her delight, for he is only the grandson of a man who made a great fortune by inventing some metal to look like silver. Though he must have been Dutch, this youth is not the conventional Dutchman in seven knickerbockers perched on a barrel, but is small and insignificant, in spite of his magnificant get-up. Never did Fernan, in his most bejewelled days, equal that studious exquisiteness; and I could pity the baronet for having had a rival with black moustaches that curl of their own accord; but pity evaporates when I find that he has got Brown Murad, and hear Mrs. Underwood's gratitude for his promise of tickets for somebody's concert. I wonder whether he is thinking about Marilda?'

'April 15th. Two great events begin to loom. One is our *soirée musicale*, for which the cards are actually being written; and Edgar and Alda are debating the programme. I am to have a quiet corner out of sight, and use my eyes and ears. How I wish you and Lance could send up yours!

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'The other is a great function at St. Matthew's, on the opening of the new infant-schools, on Whit Tuesday. Clement is coming down for it; and Robin, Angel, and I are to go with Cousin Tom to his office, where Clem will meet and take charge of us. It certainly is a fine thing to come to London, and see the world; though the nicest part of the world to me is that odd little room of Mrs. Renville's where people are so entertaining, and one catches glimpses of great luminaries in their moments of unbending and good nature. . . . . .

'May 3rd. Where shall I begin the story of our *soirée?* I will pass over the misery of serving as a *corpus vile*, for Alda and Mrs. Sturt to try experiments on with scraps of head-gear and jewellery, and merely state that I had the white alpaca with blue velvet edges, and blue beads round my head and neck; and then they did not *very much* mind the sight of me; and Edgar even said I looked a tidy little thing enough. He and Marilda disposed of me in a nice little nook in the recess of a window, more than half hidden by a curtain, and capital for seeing and hearing, nearly as good as my old perch in the organ gallery. Alda looked beautiful—such lovely rosy clouds of soft gauziness, and wreaths of wild roses! She has put an end to the habit of dressing like Marilda, to their mutual benefit; but, oh, if I could see old W. W. in such garb! Doesn't she look disgusted? But who knows what John may put her into?

'Oh, the things people wear! (then followed some pen-and-ink outlines,) and the colours and the festoonings! I trust that in some stratum of society somewhere there is more notion of the beautiful. If the world is all like this, I can't tell why it should be so dangerous; for, as far as I can see, it consists in conjugating the verb *to bore.*

'However, there was the music, and that was compensation. (A critical account ensued then.) *Private.* Poor Edgar was quite upset when one of the ladies varied from the programme by singing Alice's favourite old "Sands of Dee." I saw him frowning, and biting the end of his moustache, as if he could hardly bear it; but, as you may guess, he was the more funny and lively when he came to me, teasing me about that Sir Adrian, whom he calls a specimen of the transmutation of metals—Dutch slime made shiny,

and threatening me with who or what would be transmuted next; but I think Marilda has more principle.

'Afterwards I had a great treat, for Edgar spied Mr. Grinstead, whom we had never expected, though he had a card, as he does not care for music; and Cousin Tom only knows him through having bought his lovely group of Una and the Lion. I had met him at the Renvilles'; and Edgar brought him to my corner, where he leant against the window-shutter, and talked most pleasantly, only he would go on all through the songs; but one could excuse a great deal to a man who knew Thorwaldsen, and has seen Canova; and he told me so much that I wanted to hear, that it was a perfect feast. When he found I had never seen the Leonardo at Morecombe House, he caught Mrs. Underwood, and arranged to take us there at four o'clock on Wednesday. Fancy seeing a Leonardo! and with him to explain it! Mrs. Underwood was quite in a rapture, because she wants to see a cabinet that Lady Morecombe gave £150 for; but I thought it very nasty of Sir Adrian to say that he knew Lord Morecombe very well, and could take her there any day, to which Alda answered that she hated show houses.'

(Enclosed from Edgar.)

'The fact is, that the Cherry is a brilliant success. She is our one native genius for conversation; and I will say for the "Pursuivant" that it has kept her up to the day. At Renville's she is the life of everything; and even here the ocean of dullness cannot so entirely asphyxiate her but that she sparkles up through it; and luckily Alda has not so perceived it as to begin the extinguishing process—indeed, she has affairs of her own to look to. As to Grinstead—it is a case of captivation. Don't be afraid, or the reverse: he is a confirmed old bachelor, bald and spectacled. Renville showed him her sketch of his Una, and he said nothing had ever so hit off the soul. He met her at their house; and she, not knowing who he was, was not encumbered with any awe of greatness, but chattered like her own little self, till he was taken with her freshness and cleverness, came here on purpose to meet her, and is to show her the Morecombe gallery. A fine chance! Altogether, the little maid has so many feathers in her cap, that she wouldn't know where to stick them, if—poor little dear!—she ever found

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them out, and didn't think every attention pure pity to her lame foot.'

The next was the day of the festival at St. Matthew's. Mr. Underwood graciously consented to use a carriage large enough to transport Cherry and both her little sisters to his office, at the door of which there appeared, however, not Clement, but Ferdinand Travis. The organist had been suddenly taken ill, and Clement was supplying his place; so Ferdinand, whose firm had taken a Whitsun holiday, was the substitute, in the vain hope that Alda would have been of the party.

'No,' said Angela; 'they are going to ride. And, O Fernan! I am sure I saw Brown Murad com—'

There she stopped short, either aghast at a sort of spasm that crossed Ferdinand's countenance, or diverted by the full current of life in Holborn; and he, recovering, began to point out whatever could interest Cherry. He had a great deal to tell about St. Matthew's, where he knew his way as well as Clement himself, and piloted his charge in good time to the very place their brother had indicated for them.

The service was most beautiful, and full of life; and then ensued a procession to, and benediction of, the new school and nursery for the little ones. Afterwards came the new experience of luncheon for the large motley party in the refectory of the clergy-house—new at least to Cherry, for her sisters were not unfamiliar there; Robina had a dear friend's little brother among the choristers, and Angela was chattering to a curate or two. Clement was happy in meeting with old comrades; and Cherry was glad that she was saved from being a burthen by Ferdinand's devotion, and quite accepted his assurance that it was a great delight to him.

Then followed a feast for the school-children and the aged; but the atmosphere soon became too much for Cherry, and she thankfully accepted Ferdinand's proposal of showing her the church in detail. It was only on the other side of the quadrangle; and there was a great charm in the lofty, cool, quiet building, where she could dwell thoroughly on every decoration, permanent or temporary, and in full sympathy with her companion, who went so fully and deeply into all these subjects, as to lead her on, and

open new meanings to her. At last they sat down in a sort of cloister that ran round the court, to wait for the rest.

'Do you know,' said Geraldine, 'this place gives me a sense of life and vigour. Our own seems to me, in comparison, a sort of sleeping, or rather a mechanically acting, body, wanting a spirit and soul to be breathed into it and make it effective.'

'You have never told me about your new curate,' said Ferdinand; and indeed, by tacit consent, they had avoided the subject in Edgar's presence.

'Mr. Flowerdew? Oh, he is very good, very gentle, and kind; but he is a depressed elderly man, with all the energy disappointed and worn out of him. His wife is dead; and he has two or three children, out, settled, and fighting their way; and there he is alone, still an assistant curate, tumbled about in secondary positions too long to care for any more than just doing his duty without any life or spring.'

'Do you see much of him?' said Ferdinand, surprised by this intimate knowledge.

'Yes. He makes the sick his special care, and he thinks me one; so he comes sometimes, and sits half an hour when I am painting, without saying a word. I think it is cheerful for him, in his way,' said Cherry, with a merry laugh. 'And he is very musical; so the boys like that. But do you know, Ferdinand, when I look at him, I do feel thankful that my own dear father had not the long weary wear and tear to change him. That man is older than he would be even now.'

'Of course it must be good,' said Ferdinand. 'And is there no chance of Mr. Bevan coming back?'

'He wants another summer at the baths. The absence of the head paralyses everything so. I always feel, when I go back from St. Faith's, as if we had the framework, and of course the real essentials; but we have to do all the work of bringing it home to ourselves.'

'I know what you mean,' said Ferdinand; 'though Bexley must be more to me than any other place, this one is the great help and compensation to me. How I wish Alda were near it!'

'Has she ever been here?'

'Once or twice; but only under its shadow does one enter into the real life. Some day perhaps—'

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Geraldine could not imagine the day of Alda's entering into the real life of St. Matthew's; but she could only say, 'Of course there is a vast difference between only coming as an outsider, and being one of the congregation.'

'Immense; though I never found it out till I came to live here; and so it would be with her. After all, were she but near, or I could see her freely, I should enjoy my present life very much.'

'I'll tell you what I should do in your place,' said Cherry. 'I would go straight to Mr. Underwood, and ask his leave to visit her; and I don't believe he would make any objection.'

'No. Alda forbids that,' he answered, decidedly; 'and she can be the only judge.' Cherry felt small. But presently he added, 'I wish I could be rid of the doubt whether the present state of things is not burdensome to her. Perhaps I ought to to have freed her at once; I could have worked for her without binding her.'

'Nothing but affection really binds,' said Cherry, in some difficulty for her answer.

'No; I might have trusted to that, but I thought the release would cost her as much as myself; and she was at home then!' and he suppressed a heavy sigh.

'She said it would be easier to meet you in London,' said Cherry; but I don't think it is.'

'And absence leaves room for imaginations,' he said. 'And I have nothing tangible to set against what I hear—ay, and see.'

'What?' the word was out of Cherry's mouth before she could check it.

'You can cast it out of my mind, perhaps,' he said. 'Do you ever see a fellow of the name of Vanderkist?'

Cherry could not help starting. And his black brows bent, and his face became stern, so that she was fain to cry, 'Oh, but it's Marilda!'

'Impossible!' he said, with what she thought a terrible smile at her simplicity. 'I tell you, I saw his first look at her—at my Alda!' Some ruthless Spanish ancestor must have looked out of the deep glow of his eyes, as he added, 'I hear he has betted that she, as well as whatever I used to prize, shall be his before the end of the season.'

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'Let him!' said Cherry, proudly. 'Alda can't help that. She can't hinder his coming to the house.'

'I know,' he said. 'Do not suppose that I doubt her. I trust her entirely; but I am foolish enough to long for the assurance that there is no cause for the rumour that she encourages him.'

Under such eyes of dark fire, it was well that Cherry could sincerely answer, 'Oh no! Every one does come round her; but she does not let him do so a bit more than other people.'

'You entirely believe that I may dismiss this as a base groundless suspicion?'

'I do!' she said, with all her heart. 'We all know that Alda is used to admiration; it comes to her as naturally as pity and help to me, and makes no impression on her. Mrs. Underwood likes to have him as a fashionable guest, that's all. Oh, Alda could never be so wicked!'

'You are right, Geraldine. Thank you,' he said, just as Clement and the younger ones came in search of them, with Fred Somers, erst fellow-chorister, now fellow-Cantab—a little wiry merry fellow, the very antipodes to his bosom friend.

All wanted to stay for seven o'clock Evensong; but Robina was clear that it was impossible, since the ladies were dispersing, and they had no invitation to the clergy-house. Angela wildly asked if Clement could not take them to the Tower, or St. Paul's; Cherry could sit in a seat while they went round.

'Sit in a seat!' cried Robina. 'She is tired already. Clement, do go and call a cab.'

'Could you not go to Mrs. Kedge's, Cherry?' asked Clement. 'I want you to hear our Pentecost Hymns.'

'Come to my rooms,' said Ferdinand. 'They are much nearer; and you shall have tea and everything in no time.'

'Like greased lightning!' returned Angel, who always talked what she supposed to be Yankee to Ferdinand. 'Oh, what fun! Do come, Cherry!'

'Do come,' repeated Ferdinand, eagerly; 'it is only round the corner, no crossing, and no stairs; and you shall have a good rest—much better than jingling away in a cab.'

'Thank you;' and Cherry, looked inquiringly at Robina, whose

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discretion she viewed as little short of Wilmet's. 'Would Miss Fulmort approve?'

'Yes,' said that wise little bird; 'we need only be in by ten. You had much better, Cherry. You are quite as good as a brother —aren't you, Fernan?'

In ten minutes more, Mr. Travis's landlady was aghast at the procession pouring into her quiet ground-floor; while, after insisting on Cherry's installation on a dingy lumpy bumpy sofa, their host might be overheard giving orders for a sumptuous tea, though not exactly with the genius of Wilmet or Lance.

He had cast his anxieties to the winds, and had never shown himself so lively or so much at ease. To all it was a delightful frolic. Mr. Somers was full of fun, and even Clement was gay—perhaps because Whittingtonia had become a sort of native element to him, or else because the oddity of the thing overcame him; and Angela was in an ecstatic state, scarcely kept within bounds by her morning's promise to be *very* good.

Those dingy bachelor's rooms, close upon the street, and redolent of tobacco to the utmost degree, could seldom have re-echoed with such girlish fun as while Angela roamed about, saucily remarking on the pipes and smoking equipments—relics, not disused, of the Life Guard days. So likewise was the beautiful little chased silver tea-pot, which was committed to Robin's management. Indeed, there was a large proportion of plate, massive and remarkable.

'Mexican taste,' said Ferdinand, handing a curious sugar-basin. 'It belonged to my grandmother, and was turned over to me when I set up for myself.'

'What's this on it?' said Angel. 'I declare, 'tis the caldron the Mexicans boiled people's hearts in.'

'For shame, Angel!' said Robin; 'the Aztecs were not cannibals.'

'I beg your pardon, Bobbie; I know we read about Cortes seeing them cutting out people's hearts on their temples like the tower of Babel, because I thought of Fernan.'

'Hush!' said Cherry, seeing that the horrid subject was displeasing. 'There's nothing witty in talking of horrors. Besides, is not this the Spanish olla?'

'I believe it is,' answered Ferdinand. 'It is the Mendez

bearing, and as the Travises can boast of none, I followed my spoons.'

'With the dish,' said Mr. Somers; a joke that in their present mood set them laughing.

'Nothing can be more suited to the circumstances,' said Cherry, 'as the olla is the emblem of hospitality.'

'What are the three things up above?' asked Angel;' 'turnips going to be stewed?'

'Santiago's cockle-shells, the token of pilgrimage,' said Ferdinand. 'That's the best part of the coat.'

'Some day I'll work you a banner-screen, Fernan,' said Robina; 'but that will be when you impale our Underwood rood.'

'And the pilgrim is brought to the cross,' said Angela, in one of her grave moments of fanciful imagery.

The echo of her words, however, struck Cherry as conveying an innuendo that the child did not mean. Crosses could hardly be wanting to one who had Alda for his wife; but happily no one else seemed to perceive it; and they drifted on from grave to gay, and gay back to grave, till it was time to return to the festival Evensong.

Clement and his friends had to hurry away to the station directly after. He would have put his three sisters into a cab, and sent it home with them; but Ferdinand insisted on squeezing his long limbs into durance and escorting them, to the tune of Angel's chatter and the clatter of the windows. Cherry was the first set down; and she went straight to the drawing-room, ready for interest and sympathy.

'How late you are!' said Alda.

'How did you come?' asked Marilda.

'In a cab. It is gone on with the little girls. We stayed for evening service. The lights were so beautiful!'

'Just what boys and girls run after,' said Mr. Underwood. 'I like my opera to be an opera, and my church to be a church.'

'Yes,' said Mrs. Underwood, 'staying out so late, and in the city. I don't half like such doings.'

'What could you have done between services?' added Alda. 'Were you at the clergy-house all day?'

'Of course they were,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Trust a

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curate to take care of a pretty girl. High or low, they are all alike.'

'No,' said Cherry, in blushing indignation; 'we had tea at Mr. Travis's.'

'Indeed!' said Alda.

And Cherry knew the tone but too well; and under this plentiful shower of cold water, perceiving her own fatigue, bade good night. She was kindly bidden to send Nurse for wine, tea, or whatever she needed; but she was still conscious of displeasure.

In the morning she was weary and dispirited, and for the first time felt that there was no one to remark, as Felix or Wilmet would have done, that she was flagging. Failing this, she prepared as usual to go to her class; but before starting she encountered Mrs. Underwood.

'Geraldine,' said that lady, majestically, 'you are a talented young person; but—you must excuse me—I cannot have such independence under my roof. It is not *comifo*. Bless me, don't tremble so; I don't mean anything. You meant no harm; only you should have come home, you know, when your brother wasn't there.'

'But he was!' gasped Geraldine, colouring.

'Why, wasn't it that young man Travis met you?'

'He met us, for Clement was hindered; but Clement was there, and was with us all the time.'

'H'm! That ought to have been explained. Why didn't you tell your sister? She is quite distressed.'

A summons from Mr. Underwood obliged Cherry to hurry away, her heart throbbing, her head whirling, and no comfort but hard squeezing the ivory back of Lord Gerald; and when she reached Mr. Renville's, her hand was trembling so, that she could not have drawn a line if the good hausfrau had not dosed her with the strong coffee, which in true German fashion was always ready. Then the absorbing interest of her art revived her; and she returned home, cheered, and believing that the misunderstanding was cleared up.

Indeed, Mrs. Underwood was as good-natured as ever; and Alda was chiefly employed in rejecting all the solicitations to accompany the party to Morecombe House, and rebutting the remonstrances

on the incivility to Mr. Grinstead; to which Marilda had yielded, but grumbling loudly at the bore of seeing pictures and taking no pains to conceal that she was cross and angry with Cherry for having brought it upon her.

Poor Cherry! Of the few parties of pleasure of her life, this was that which most reminded her of the old woman of Servia! After having Marilda's glum face opposite through the drive, she was indeed most kindly welcomed by Mr. Grinstead; but how could she enjoy the attention that was so great a kindness and honour, when every pause before a picture was a manifest injury to her companions?

Mrs. Underwood indeed had occupation in peeping under holland covers, estimating the value of carpets and curtains, and admiring the gilt frames; but this did not hold out as long as the examination of each favourite picture in detail; and what was worse, Marilda plumped herself down in the first chair in each room, and sat poking the floor with her parasol, the model of glum discontent. How could the mind be free for the Madonna's celestial calm, or the smiling verisimilitude of portraiture? how respond or linger, when the very language of art was mere uninteresting jargon to impatient captives, who thought her comprehension mere affectation? While to all other discomforts must be added the sense of missing one of the best opportunities of her life, and of ill responding to a gracious act of condescension.

She came home tired to death, and with a bad headache, that no one took the trouble to remark; and she dressed for dinner with a sense that it mattered to no one how she felt.

Just as she was ready, Marilda came gravely in, sitting down in preparation, Cherry felt, for something dreadful; but even her imagination failed to depict the fact.

'Geraldine,' was the beginning, 'Alda wishes you to hear that she has put an end to the engagement.'

Cherry absolutely screamed, 'Oh, oh, don't let her do that! It would be so dreadful!'

Marilda looked severe. 'I don't suppose you thought what it was coming to.'

'O! I have often been sorry to see things, but it seemed so atrocious to think so.'

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'Then you must have known you were doing wrong.'

'What—how—what have I done? I don't know what you mean!'

'Indeed! It is of no use to look frightened and innocent. Perhaps you did not mean anything; but when it grew so marked, Alda could not but feel it.'

'What? Does Alda mean *that?*' cried Cherry, starting up, scarlet with horror.

'Now I see you understand. She is terribly hurt. She excuses it, for she says you have been so petted all your life, that you don't know the right bounds.'

'And can you really think this of me?' moaned she.

'It is just like every one when they have the chance—no one ever means it,' said Marilda.

'Oh!' cried Cherry, as a fresh horror came across her, 'but if Alda thinks ever so horridly of me, how can she doubt him? Oh, stop her, stop her! Let me only tell her how he talked of her yesterday! His whole soul is full of her. Oh, stop her, Marilda, do!'

'It is of no use,' said Marilda; 'she has sent her letter. She was resolved to do nothing hastily, so she went this morning and saw the little girls.'

'Oh, oh!' broke in Cherry, with another cry of pain. 'Those poor children have not been brought into trouble again?'

'No; it was no doing of theirs; but when she perceived the exclusive attention that—when she found,' hesitated Marilda, forgetting her lesson, 'how you had been sitting in the cloister—in short, how it had all gone on—she said it was the finishing stroke.'

'Oh!' a sigh or groan, as if stabbed; then with spirit, 'but why wasn't she there herself? He only took me for want of her! He only speaks to me because I am her sister. He was so unhappy—I was trying to cheer him.'

'So you might think; but that's the way those things run on. There's the gong!'

Cherry rose, but felt that sitting at table would end in faintness; and Marilda went away in doubt, between pity and displeasure, whether at contrition or affectation.

No sooner was the door shut, and Cherry alone, than a terrible

hysterical agony came on. There was personal sense of humiliation —passionate anger, despair, for Ferdinand's sake—miserable loneliness and desertion. She felt as if she were in a house full of enemies; and had absolute difficulty in restraining screams for Felix to come and take her home. The physical need of Wilmet or Sibby, to succour and soothe her agitation and exhaustion, soon became so great as to overpower the mental distress; but she would not call or ring; and when Mrs. Sturt came, the kind woman made as if the headache accounted for all.

She reported that Miss Alda likewise had gone to her room with a headache; and Cherry saw no one but Mrs. Underwood, who looked in to offer impossible remedies, and be civilly but stiffly compassionate.

The stifled hysteria was much worse for Geraldine than free tears. She had a weary night of wretched dream fancies, haunted by Ferdinand's sombre face, convulsed with rage, and tormented by the belief that she had done something so frightful as to put her out of the pale of humanity; nor was it till long after daylight that she could so collect her ideas as to certify herself that if she had done wrong, it had at least been unwittingly; but even then she was in a misery of shame, and of the most intense longing for her brother or sister to defend and comfort her.

She managed to rise and dress; but she was far too unwell to attempt the classes for the day. Alda spoke coldly; and she crept away, to lie on the sofa in the old school-room, trusting that before post-time her hand might grow steady enough to write an entreaty to be taken home, and longing—oh! longing more every hour for Edgar, and still he did not come! Marilda looked in, began to believe her really ill, grew compassionate, asked how she treated such attacks, deemed her penitent, and began to soothe her as if she was a naughty baby. Then, in desperation, Cherry ventured to ask what had been heard of him—Mr. Travis. He had been at the door—he had taken no refusal—had forced an interview—he was gone. Alda was in her own room, bolted in. Marilda had not seen her since.

Cherry shook from head to foot, and quivered with suppressed strangling sobs, as the shame of such a requital for the sacrifice of Ferdinand's whole career agonised her at one moment, and at

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another she was terrified at the possible effect on that fervid nature.

Oh, that long, long piteous day! She never did write—never even felt as if she could sit up to guide a pen. At last Alda came in, with a strange awe-struck paleness about her face, as if she had gone through something terrible; and in a tone that sounded unnatural, said, 'Come, Cherry, don't give way so. I didn't mean to accuse you. People don't always know what they are doing. I am thankful on my own account.'

Cherry had longed for a kind word; but this sort of pardon was like Alda's taking the advantage of her when Felix was not there to protect her. Not naturally meek, she was too much shaken to control a voice that sounded more like temper than sorrow. 'You have no right to accuse me at all, as if I were a traitor!'

'Not a deliberate traitor, my dear,' said Alda, in a voice of candour; 'certainly not; but you don't know the advantage helplessness and cleverness give over us poor beauties who show our best at first. I blame no one for using their natural weapons.'

'Don't, Alda!' cried Cherry, with the sharpness of keen offence. 'You may keep that speech for those you got it up for!'

'Well, if you are in such a mood as that, nobody can talk to you,' said Alda, going away, and leaving her to a worse paroxysm of misery than before, and an inexpressible sense of desolation, passing into an almost frantic craving for Edgar, to make him take her home.

Marilda gave a little relief by telling her that he was sent for; but after long expectation, word came that he was not at home, nor did his landlady know when he would return.

By this time it was too late to send a letter; and Cherry began to feel ashamed of having so given way, and to think of exerting herself to recover, if only to be in a condition to go home when Edgar should be found; so she made an effort to remember the remedies with which she was wont to be passively dosed by Wilmet, went to bed, and tried hard to put herself to sleep. Though it was long before she effectually succeeded, she was much calmer in the morning, deeply wounded indeed, but trying to accept the imputation that her habit of expecting aid might have led her into what had given umbrage to Alda, and that self-

immolation might yet heal the misunderstanding, and the desire to plead with Alda seemed to brace her nerves; but Alda was not attainable. She only just came in, in her habit, while Mrs. Sturt was dressing Cherry, and said that she had such a headache, that she must take a country ride; and Cherry, who felt as if she had been under a stampede of wild horses, could only just crawl to the sofa, and lie there; while the whole family were in such wholesome dread of that dumb hysteria, that they were as tender as they knew how to be, and abstained from all reference to the previous day.

The afternoon had come on the weary, home-sick, exhausted spirit, when a springy step came along the corridor, a light airy rap struck the door, and a tall, lithe, yet strong form, and a pair of kind smiling eyes, brought the sense of love and guardianship that the spoilt child of home had been pining for. She had yesterday meant to cry out to him, 'O Edgar, take me home!' but she did not speak, only looked up, glad and relieved.

'Why, Cherry,' as he kissed her hot brow, and caressingly held her limp cold hand, 'it seems to be the family fashion to suffer by proxy for these little catastrophes. Who is to take to his or her bed when some Indian spinster hooks W. W.'s engineer?'

'Hush, Edgar! Have you seen *him*?'

'Have not I?'

'Ah, I knew you must be with him, when they could not find you!'

'Me? No; I had enough of it the night before! I had had too narrow an escape of getting my neck wrung for declining to act as go-between, to subject myself to the same again, and went off with some fellows to Richmond—only came back an hour ago.'

'O, Edgar! if you had but tried—'

'Take my advice, Cherry. Never put your foot into a boiling cauldron! Besides, don't you know perfectly well that never was there a worse matched pair? St. Anthony and Venus attired by the Graces; and very little more attire could he give her. If dear old Blunderbore had had a grain of common sense he would have told them so a year ago; and I should have thought even you could have seen it to be a happy release.'

'I see you don't know the cause—'

'Visible enough to the naked eye!' And Edgar, in imitation of Theodore, hummed 'Mynheer van Dunck.'

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'For shame, Edgar! Oh no! it is only what could be mended, if you would but show her that I—that he—that he only was kind to me for her sake. If she would only hear what he was saying to me! but she won't! Just set it straight; and then, please—please take me home.'

'Well,' said Edgar, as he gathered the drift of her broken phrases, spoken with her face hidden on his shoulder, 'this is as nasty, spiteful a trick as Alda ever played! He said she put it on some motive of jealousy—and she always was a jealous toad; but I never guessed at this! Never mind, Chérie. She only wanted a pretext, and you came first to hand. I'll let her know what I think of it—and Polly too!'

'But, indeed, I don't think I was guarded enough.'

'Of course you don't. You and Tina think yourselves the most heavenly-minded when you can accuse yourselves of anything utterly ridiculous.'

'It was what she heard from Robin and Angel.'

'The marplots of the family—little minxes!' said Edgar, with a bitterness she was sorry to have provoked. 'No,' he added, 'not marplots in this case. I see it all as plain as a pikestaff! Felix having shown his usual refreshing innocence by leaving Alda in this predicament, she had to get out of it as best she could; so she trumps up this charge between Robin's prudery and Angel's chatter; nor would I have blamed her a bit if she had only flourished it in his eyes; but to poison Marilda with it, and annihilate you—I can't forgive that!'

'Oh, but she believes it.'

'If she gets up a little delusion—a slight screen to the Mynheer—she ought to keep it to herself.'

'I shall try to write it all properly to her when I get home.'

'Home! You aren't going to be ill?'

'No; but I can't stay after all this—to be looked on in this way.'

'I'll settle that.'

'You can't expose Alda.'

'I shall expose her no more than I have done fifty times before. Don't be afraid. We understand one another—Polly, Alda, and I.'

'Don't defend me! I had so much rather go back.'

'Of course; but you need not be a little goose. You did not come here for pleasure, but business. And is this great genius to be stifled because Alda talks a little unjustifiable nonsense?'

'Do you think Felix and Wilmet would tell me to stay?'

'Wilmet certainly would. Felix might be tempted to take his baby home to rock; but even he has sense enough to tell you that the only way to deal with such things is to brazen them out.'

'I haven't got any brass.'

'Then you must get some. Seriously, Cherry, it would be very silly to go flying home, throwing up all your opportunities, and the very thing to give some *vraisemblance* to Alda's accusation. If I had only been here yesterday, I'd have choked it in the throat of her, and hindered you from caring a straw; but I didn't want to meet Travis in his exies.'

'I wish you would really tell me about him—poor dear Fernan!'

'Take care! That looks suspicious. Well, poor fellow! the Mexican is strong in him. *Grattez lui* ever so slightly. Well for Mynheer that he is not out with him on a prairie, with a revolver! But, whereas Audley and Felix caught him in time to make a spoon out of a bowie-knife, I don't expect much to happen, beyond my distraction from his acting caged panther in my room till two o'clock that night!'

'He came here and saw her yesterday. Have you seen him since?'

No; Edgar had kept out of the way, and would not talk of him; but stood over his sister, wishing to soothe and relieve the little thing, for whom he cared more than for all the lovers put together, and whose wan exhausted looks, visible suffering, and nervous shudders he could not bear to see. 'I wish you weren't too big for rocking, Baby,' he said. And then he sat down to the piano, playing and singing a low soft lullaby, which at last brought quiet sleep to the refreshment of the harassed mind and weary frame.

The hum of conversation in an undertone at length gradually roused her.

'The long and short of it is, that she was tired of it.'

'But she wouldn't have invented such a story.'

'I never said she invented it! She's not so stupid but that she

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can put a gloss on a thing; and you *know* she hates to have a civil word said to any one but herself—particularly to that poor little dear.'

'Then it wasn't right to let him be always running after her.'

'Stuff! They'd been cronies ever since he was first caught; in fact, she was one of the tame elephants that licked him into shape, long before he set eyes on either of you. No stuff about it at all; they are just like brother and sister. The poor child would no more be capable of such a thing than that lay figure of hers—hasn't it in her; and for you to go and bully her!'

'Well,' in a half-puzzled, half-angered tone, 'that's what Alda says. She declares she only told me, and never meant me to speak to *her* about the cause.'

'She wanted to play off the injured heroine; and you—not being up to such delicate subtilties, walked off to speak your mind. Eh!'

'I thought I ought.'

'You put your great thumb on a poor little May-fly, just as if it had been a tortoise!'

'I'm sure I had no notion she would be so unhappy; all girls do such things; and most are proud of it. I was only disappointed to find her like the rest; but I'd no notion she would cry herself ill.'

Here Geraldine's senses became sufficiently clear to make her aware that she was the topic, and ought to rouse herself, no longer to let the discussion mingle with her dreams. With some effort she opened her eyes, and saw Edgar astride on the music-stool, and Marilda leaning on the mantel-shelf.

'I'm awake,' she drowsily said.

'To the battle over your prostrate body,' said Edgar. 'Go to sleep again, little one. Polly is very sorry, and won't do so no more.'

'She didn't say so, Edgar,' said Cherry; 'and if I had really done so, she ought to have been a great deal more angry with me.'

'Well, Geraldine,' said Marilda, 'I believe, whatever you did, you didn't know it; and I know I was hard on you. My father and mother don't know anything about it—only that it is off—'

'And that they rightly ascribe to Alda's good sense,' said Edgar.

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This much relieved Cherry, who had thought it impossible to remain where she was, viewed as a traitor to her own sister. It wounded her, indeed, that Marilda should merely condone the offence, instead of acquitting her; but when she recollected the probability that Marilda had suffered the like treatment from Alda, who was nevertheless loved so heartily, it began to dawn upon her that there was a disposition to view the offence as common, natural, and light, rather than not excuse the offender. She despised her cousin for lowering the standard to suit a favourite, and was sure she should never be comfortable again till she got home; but she was reasonable enough to perceive the force of what Edgar had shown her—as to the folly of forsaking her studies, and abandoning the advantages offered to her; and his kindness had much cheered her; so she said no more about going home, and resumed her former habits, though feeling that Marilda's patronizing cordiality was gone, and that Alda was simply cold and indifferent.

She felt especially unwilling to face the two little girls, who seemed to have acted as false witnesses against her; but an imploring note from Robina besought her to call; and on arriving in the parlour, where interviews were allowed, she was greeted with, 'O Cherry, is it true? and was that why Alda came here?'

Then she found that they had heard from home of the rupture of the engagement; and that they had immediately connected it with Alda's extraordinary visit of the week previous.

'She came to bring us a cake,' said Robin; 'but as she never did so before, I thought something was at the bottom of it, and that she just wanted to hear more about Ferdinand and his lodgings.'

'And,' added Angel, who, if less sensible, was far before Robina in a certain irregular precocity, 'I thought I'd get a rise out of her, and chaff her a little. She used to be so savage last year, whenever Fernan treated you with common humanity.'

'O Angel, how could you!'

'You don't mean that it did the harm! Bobbie said so; but I didn't think Alda could be so silly as to think it in earnest, Cherry.'

'Angel, you have been playing with edge-tools.'

'Cherry, tell me what you mean!' Angela pounced on both her arms, as if to shake it out of her.

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'Never do such a thing again, Angel. You cannot tell what you may be doing.'

'Well, if any one could be so stupid! So dense, as not to see it was fun! Now, Robin—'

'I think,' said the practical Robin, 'that all you can do, is to write down a full confession that you meant to teaze Alda.'

'Yes, yes, yes,' cried Angela, with less shame than Cherry would have thought possible, 'I will! I will! and then they'll make it up. Who would have thought Alda could have been so easily taken in? But how shall I do it unknownst to the harpies?'

Cherry offered a pencil, and a bit of her drawing-block. She made no suggestion, thinking that the more characteristic the confession was, the more it would prove its authenticity. Angela retired into a window, and wrote, in her queer unformed hand:

I, Angela Margaret Underwood, hereby confess that whatever I told Alda, my sister, about Geraldine and F. T., was all cram; and if I did it too well, I'm very sorry for it. F. T. didn't take a bit more notice of Cherry than of Robin and me; and of course he cannot marry the three of us: and of course it was all right, for Clement was there. Ask him.

Witness my hand,
ANGELA MARGARET UNDERWOOD.

Then she called, 'Come and witness it, Robin.'

'Nonsense,' said Robina; and coming to look, she exclaimed, 'you have made it simply ridiculous. This will do no good!—See, Cherry.'

But Cherry would not have it altered, and merely bade Robina write her testimony.

This took much longer, though the produce was much briefer. It was only—

My dear Alda,

Angela was only talking nonsense the other day. If I had not thought so, I would have told you.

Your affectionate sister,
ROBINA B. UNDERWOOD.

'You've made a letter of it!' exclaimed Angela. 'I thought it was to be a last will and—no, a dying speech and confession; which is it? Well, if that does not set it all straight, I can't tell what will!'

Cherry was a good deal perplexed by the testimony now she had obtained it. She thought the matter over on her return, and ended by seeking Marilda; and with much excuse for Angela, putting it into her hands to show to Alda. She felt it due to herself to make sure that Marilda saw it, such as it was. CHAP. XXVI.

Marilda undertook that Alda should see it. Geraldine watched and waited. There was no apology to herself. At that she did not wonder. Was there any note of recall sounded to Ferdinand? Was Alda proud? or was she in very truth indifferent, and unwilling to give up her excuse for a quarrel? or had she really relented, and apologized in secret?

It was strange to know so little, and venture so much less with her own sister than could Marilda, whom, in their present stiff reserve, Cherry durst not question.

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DON OR MYNHEER?

'Hear the truth—
A lame girl's truth, whom no one ever praised
For being patient.'

George Elliot.

ONE morning, after a private interview with Alda, Mr. Underwood entered the drawing-room, hilariously announcing that Alda was a lucky girl this time, for now she had a man in no fear of his relations.

Geraldine was glad of the need of getting into the carriage directly, and that her transit to Mr. Renville's was too brief for any answer to be needed to her companion's warm satisfaction. Affairs of this sort had come so thickly upon the family in the course of the last eighteen months, that she did not feel the excitement of novelty; and she wished so little to dwell on the present, that at the museum, the absorbing interest of her life-study drove out the immediate recollection of the stranger life-study she had left.

There could be no question as to the veritable cause of Alda's conduct to Ferdinand; but Cherry was too much ashamed of it to

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rejoice in her own justification, scarcely even hoping that Marilda would perceive it.

Most likely Alda would have preferred staving off the crisis a little longer—at least till those keen eyes were out of sight—but she had now to do with a man whose will it was not easy to parry, and whom delay and coyness might have driven off altogether. Cherry did not see her till they met at luncheon; and there was Sir Adrian, who promoted the little lame girl to a shake of the hand. Alda looked gracious and unusually handsome, being, in fact, relieved from a state of fretting uneasiness; Mrs. Underwood was beaming with triumph; Marilda—again there is no word for it but—glum!

There was a rose show at the Botanic Gardens; but Cherry had declined it, and Marilda immovably refused to go. After they had seen the other two ladies set off, resplendent under Sir Adrian's escort, Marilda announced her intention of driving, as she often did, to the City, to fetch her father home, and, more cordially than of late, offered a seat to Cherry, if she did not mind waiting.

The City to Cherry's ears meant Ferdinand, whom she would not face for worlds; but she told herself that it was not like Bexley, where every one who went to the bank was sure to be presently seen at Froggatt's, and she would not reject this advance from her cousin.

Indeed, Marilda wanted to talk, and freely told all she had been hearing. The baronetcy was in the third generation, having been conferred on the original transmuter, a Lord Mayor, with whom his son had toiled for the larger half of his days, and comparatively late had bought an estate, and married a lady of quality. He had not long survived, and his widow had remarried. Of her nothing more was known; but her son was so entirely his own master, that her opposition was not likely to be dangerous. Sir Adrian had the reputation of great wealth; and though he partook of the usual amusements of young men, there was no reason to suppose that he did so to an extent that he could not afford. Altogether, it was a brilliant conquest; but 'How one does hate it all!' concluded Marilda.

This was all the amends Cherry received for the reproach that had so keenly wounded her. Probably Marilda had really dis-

missed the charge; but hers was not a fine-grained mind, used to self-examination or analysis; and she acted on a momentary impression, without much regard to the past or to consistency. Her affections were deep and strong; but partly from circumstances they were like those of a dog, depending rather on contact than esteem. She had accepted Edgar and Alda as brother and sister, and whatever they did, stood by them with all her might; nor did she ever so much as realize that Alda had been wrong, and she herself misled. She would rather believe it the way of the world, and part of the nature of things, than open her mind to blame Alda.

Besides, the sense of not understanding Cherry, and the recollection of the effect produced on her by words apparently quite inadequate, the seeing her power of talking to and amusing gentlemen with whom she herself had not an idea in common, Edgar's tender fervent pride in her, and Alda's half-contemptuous acknowledgment of her ability—all this contributed to give Marilda a certain shyness, awe, and constraint, that sometimes looked cold, and sometimes cross, and puzzled Cherry, who never dreamt of being formidable.

When they reached the house of business, Marilda went to her father's room, for since his illness she often helped him to wind up his correspondence; and Cherry sat in the carriage, her attention divided between a book and the busy traffic of the street.

Presently she saw a tall lean figure in black, with a deeply-cut sallow face set in grey whiskers. She knew it for the Vicar of St. Matthew's; and he, after bowing and passing, turned, and coming to the window, said, 'Will you kindly tell me the right address to Mr. Audley, in Australia? Clement left it with me, but I have mislaid it.'

'The Rev. C. S. Audley, Carrigaboola, Albertstown, West Australia.' And as he repeated it with thanks, she could not restrain herself from stretching out a hand in entreaty, and saying, 'Oh! pray, pray tell me! How is he? Mr. Travis?'

'Your eldest brother's letter has done him a great deal of good.'

'Please tell me about him,' implored Cherry, colouring. 'We have known him for so long before. How does he bear it?'

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Mr. Fulmort let himself into the carriage, and sat down by her, saying, 'He is bearing it as you could most wish.'

'I longed to know. I feared it would be very terrible. His is not an English nature.'

'It has been a great struggle. That first night he never went home at all, but wandered about till daylight. I found him at five in the morning, sunk down on his knees in our porch, with his head against the church door, in a sort of exhausted doze.'

'Oh, well that he knew the way!' sighed Cherry. 'No one ever was so cruelly treated!' she added with frowning vehemence. 'And then?'

'I took him to my rooms, and made him rest, and I went to Brown's and excused his non-attendance. By the time he went to your sister he had quite mastered himself.'

'He must. She never told about it; but we are sure she was quite overawed.'

'He came back quite calm, with a certain air of secresy, and has gone on with a sort of stern quietness ever since,' said the Vicar, lowering his voice. 'Only on Sunday—he is one of our collectors at the Offertory—he brought up his alms-bag bursting with bracelets and rings, and things of that sort.'

'Poor Fernan! how like him to do it in that way!'

'I think it relieved him. He is perfectly free of bitterness towards your sister—allows no flaw in her; but he is striving hard not to retain animosity against your uncle.'

'It is deserved by no one but her!' exclaimed Cherry; 'and there's worse to come. I don't know whether I ought to mention it; but it will be better for it to come to him from you.'

'*It* is true, then?' said Mr. Fulmort, understanding her directly. 'My sister told me it was reported.'

'It was only settled yesterday evening. I am afraid *this* is worse for him than if it had been any one else.'

'So am I. It seems to be the crisis of a long emulation. I begged Aston—my brother-in-law—to ascertain what was thought about it in the corps; and he said that though poor Travis had never got on well with the other men, there was a general feeling that he was not handsomely treated.'

'That wretched man betted—'

Mr. Fulmort kindly but decidedly checked her. 'You had better not dwell on such reports. Things for which we are not responsible must be made the best of when they bring us new connections. Our friend is not unprepared, and I will take care he does not hear this casually.'

'Thank you—oh! thank you! Give him my—' she caught herself up and blushed—'my very best remembrances; and tell him,' she added, carried away in spite of herself, 'that he must always be like one of ourselves.'

'It will be a great comfort to him. Nothing can exceed his affection and gratitude to your family—indeed he said, with tears in his eyes, that to your brothers he "owes his very self also." I hope nothing will disturb that friendship.'

'What will he do? Set about some great work somewhere?'

Mr. Fulmort smiled sadly. 'It is not safe to rush into great works to allay disappointment,' he said. 'I think he is wiser to keep steadily to his occupation, at least for the present; but he is giving his whole leisure to his district and the evening classes. I am glad to have met you. Good-bye.'

It was lucky that Cherry had plenty of time to subside before the return of Marilda and her father. The latter was much exalted by the explanation he had had with Sir Adrian and his man of business. The rent-roll was all that could be desired, and so were the proposed settlements; nor was there any fear on the score of the family. The lawyer privately told Mr. Underwood that the mother, Lady Mary Murray, was a most gentle lady, without a spark of pride, and very anxious to see her son married.

Nor did her letter belie this assurance. She expressed gladness that her son's choice should be a clergyman's daughter, and warmly invited Alda to come and visit her at the Rectory, and make herself at home among the new brothers and sisters there.

It was gathered—partly from Sir Adrian, partly from gossip—that Lady Mary, a scantily-portioned maiden, had been too timid and docile to withstand the parental will, which devoted her to the wealthy old baronet; but in her widowhood she had followed the inclination that had been pooh-poohed by her family in her girlhood. As a country clergyman's wife, her homely quiet existence had less and less influence over her son; and there was no danger of Alda

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finding in her an imperious mother-in-law, though, except as a connecting link, she would be valueless as an introduction. She was absolutely foolish enough to be romantically delighted at her son's marrying for love; and Geraldine fell in love with her on the spot, on reading her letter—one of the very few which Alda showed, for in general she kept her correspondence to her herself. She avoided Cherry, and only talked to Marilda of externals.

Nothing was to be definitively arranged till Felix had come to London, and given his approval to the draught of the settlements, of which he and Mr. Murray were to be trustees. He was so much grieved and ashamed, that much urging from Wilmet was needed to convince him that he ought not to leave the whole to Tom Underwood; but as a counterpoise there was Cherry to see—and oh! joy of joys! to fetch home. So he consented to go up on a Saturday afternoon, and return on Tuesday; and thus it was, that one evening in July Cherry was gathered into his arms, murmuring 'Felicissimo mio, what an age it is since I have had you!'

Good-natured Mrs. Underwood had made it a family party, including Robina and Angela, the worthy dame having little notion how slightly they appreciated the honour, nor how curiosity, and love of Felix and a holiday, contended with very tumultuous and angry sensations. That Alda had never taken the smallest notice of Angela's confession, did not render her cold kiss the pleasanter, nor the circle less awful as the party sat round, awaiting the arrival of Sir Adrian. There they were, nine uncomfortable people, sitting on gilded blue damask chairs, too few and too far apart for a comfortable whisper; the two youngest very conscious of their best white frocks; the two eldest—the one in a flurry of anxiety and suspense, the other in a fret of impatience and testiness; and Marilda—having announced her opinion that Sir Adrian would shirk it, and not come at all—in a state of glumness. Edgar, however—an exception both to the discomfort and the seat—threw himself into the breach with the story of the mysterious disappearance of a nun, (Cherry suspected it of being *ben trovato* for the nonce,) and when that was worn out, and the master of the house insisted on ringing for dinner, and the mistress was almost in tears at his hunger and temper, and her own fear of rudeness, while Marilda only declared that it was no more than the due of tardiness,

it was Edgar alone who had strength of mind to declare that patience ought to end, and to pull the bell.

The guest arrived with the dinner, looking so sulky about the eyes, that Cherry suspected him of having delayed while pitying himself for the ante-nuptial infliction of this party. However, he proved to have some justification, for a little stiffness of movement in giving his arm to Mrs. Underwood elicited that he had bruised his shoulder in a fall; and that good lady, pursuing the subject with less tact than solicitude, drew from him that he had been mounting at his banker's door, when his horse shied, and got its head away from the groom, but was caught at once by a clerk sort of fellow. A showy brute, with an uncertain temper. He should get rid of it.

Angela had been nudging Edgar all the time, to make him ask what horse it was; and as he turned a deaf ear, her voice erected itself with the shrill pert sound that is the misfortune of girlhood—'Was it Brown Murad?'

Sir Adrian had to look to find out where the voice came from before he answered in the affirmative.

'Then he isn't a brute at all!' said the same voice, with great decision. 'He is as gentle as a lamb, and will eat bread out of your hand if you know how to use him properly!'

Her cheeks were crimson, and she was greatly displeased that Edgar and Geraldine should both begin talking of other things with all their might.

Sir Adrian had more of the art of conversation than poor Ferdinand; and as politics came up, Edgar declared himself to have become a voluntary victim to unanimity between the three contracting powers, who had harmoniously joined in rending his carcase. He left them, nearly as soon as the ladies did, to discuss the business part of the affair, and came to the aid of Cherry and Robina, who were vainly trying to convince Angela of the inexpedience of her outbreak, and obtaining in return the sentiment, 'I don't care what he does to Alda. It is her choice, but not poor dear Brown Murad's, that he has got such a master!'

'You have done your best to make him fare worse.'

'Now, Edgar, you only want to frighten me.'

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'No. If Vanderkist does not entirely forget the pertness of an *enfant terrible*, it will just add another sting to his dislike of the poor beast.'

Angela fairly burst into tears, and ran away to the school-room, whence she returned with a bearing so magnanimous and desperate, that Cherry and Robina dreaded lest she should be meditating an apology and an appeal on behalf of the horse; so that they were much relieved when the carriage came to take the young ladies home, before the consultation in the dining-room broke up. Even then Angel did not wholly abstain, but when Alda gave her mechanical kiss, she said, 'Alda, please don't let Sir Adrian be unkind to that poor dear horse!'

'Silly child! What fancies you take into your head!' said Alda, laughing, with a good-humoured superiority such as she had not shown at home. 'You need not fear but that whatever belongs to him is made happy.'

Angela returned an unfeigned look of astonishment, and exclaimed, 'After all, I do believe you are really in love with him!'

'Angel,' said Edgar, putting his hand on her shoulder, 'I called you an *enfant terrible* just now; but you are too big for that indulgence, unless you mean to be equally hateful to friend and foe.'

Angela shook off his hand, and tossed her head disrespectfully, but went off in silence. Sir Adrian only came upstairs to say he had promised to look in on Lady Somebody; and Alda bade good night as soon as he was gone. She had evidently nothing to say to Felix that night, nor the next morning, though he waited about after breakfast to give her the opportunity; [accompanied the family to their very dry church; and then, announcing his intention of repairing to St. Matthew's, was seen no more—not even at dinner-time, when his absence was somewhat resented by his hosts, and vexed Cherry a good deal.

However, he appeared before ten o'clcok, made an apology about his unexpected detention, and when the family circle broke up, obeyed Cherry's wistful look, and followed her to her room.

'Was is it about Fernan?' she asked.

'The clerk sort of fellow who stopped the horse?'

'It did cross me, but I thought it too good to be true. How was it?'

'He had been sent on some business to the bank, and was almost at the door when Sir Adrian came out. The groom may have been holding the horse carelessly. Sir Adrian spoke angrily; the horse started, got his head free, and reared, throwing him down with his foot in the stirrup, so that he would have been dragged if Fernan had not got hold of the bridle, and his voice quieted poor Brown Murad in a moment.'

'Dear good fellow! I hope Sir Adrian did not punish him.'

'He is too valuable for that, I hope; but Sir Adrian did not spare abuse to man or beast, and threw a thank-you to Ferdinand as if he did not recognise him. Most likely we should never have heard of the adventure if it had not jarred the weak place in poor Fernan's back. He did not find it out at first, and stayed at his work the rest of the day; but it has been getting worse ever since, and I found him on the sofa, lengthened out with a chair.'

'That most horrible of sofas—all bars and bumps! Poor Fernan!'

'He only told me he had got a sprain in catching a rearing horse; and then I leapt to the conclusion, and made him tell me. He says he has hurt himself in the same way before, and that the Life Guards' surgeon told him there was nothing for it but rest.'

'Rest, indeed! like St. Lawrence's gridiron—all but the fire! What did you do for him?'

'Wished for Wilmet, and remembered Lance's telling me that I was of no use to myself nor any one else.'

'Fancy Lance saying that! But you didn't really do nothing?'

'Luckily Edgar came in search of me, and showed what resource is. He had up the landlady, and as usual captivated her She produced a mattress, and Edgar routed out some air-cushions that Fernan had used before, and they made him much more comfortable. I want to take him home, but he does not think he can bear the journey.'

'No,' said Cherry; 'and he would be always in the way of hearing about *this;* but it is dreadful to have him laid up in that dismal hole.'

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'I ran round to the clergy-house, and they will look after him as much as they can.'

'How is he looking?'

'As if he had not slept all night, but otherwise I believe this has done him good; I fancy he never knew what the first impulse of the ferocious old Mexican might be.'

'Did he say anything?'

'No, but the Vicar did. He has had a terrible time; but I hope the worst is over. We read the Evening Service together; and he looked so full of peace, that I thought of the contrast with that Christmas morning when he opened his heart about the fire. There was all the difference between blind feeling after truth and holding it in the hand.'

'Was Edgar with you then?' asked Cherry, eagerly.

'No, he came later.'

'You Blunderbore!' said Cherry, rallying her playfulness to hide the extinction of that moment's hope; 'how like the good Christian who gave the wounded man the sermon first and the raspberry-vinegar after!'

'Come with me to-morrow, and give him the raspberry-vinegar then, Cherry.'

'Nay,' said Cherry, feeling this impossible, but withholding the reason; 'I am as bad—just as much demoralized by a Wilmet—and should be no good.'

'The sight of you would be ever so much good. You needn't be shy. You went with Clem.'

'Once too often,' faltered Cherry.

'Eh? Why W. W. said not a word against it!'

'I would go with all my heart, Felix,' said Cherry, earnestly, 'but that I am afraid Alda gave him the—the same reason she did to Marilda.'

'What do you mean? You are all one blush! You can't mean that she pretended jealousy?'

'I never meant you to know,' said Cherry. 'O Felix! nothing ever was so dreadful! Marilda thought it so bad of me. I did so long for you!'

'You should have sent for me. I never thought of exposing you to such an insult.'

'I tried to write, but my hand was too shaky; and then Edgar came, and was so very dear! He said Alda only laid hold of this as a plea for getting out of the affair; and you see he was right. Don't be vexed, Felix; it is all over now, and I hope it has made me more of a woman and less of a baby; but after this, I could not go to him.'

'No. I declare I can forgive Alda anything rather than this!'

'She does not know what she is saying when she is in an ill-used mood—especially of me. Indeed, I believe I ought to have been more guarded. Shall you tell her about the horse?'

'Certainly not.'

'And are you letting this go on without speaking to her?'

'I have written twice.'

'She never told me. What did you say?'

'A prose—I fear in the leader and heavy father style—which probably she never read; and the answers were civil enough, but meant that she would please herself.'

'You really do not mean to say anything?'

'If she asks my opinion, I must; but she does not. I am not here to give my consent to the marriage, but to see fair play in the settlements.'

'Do you think that right?'

'Remember, we know nothing against him, except his conduct to Fernan.'

'We know he has not much religion.'

'Cherry, I should put that objection forward decisively if she were a younger one, for whom I am bound to judge; but she is only a year younger than I am, and has seen more of the world. She must know more about his principles than I can, and be able to judge whether she chooses to trust to them. No argument of mine would make any difference to her; and I have not the right to thrust in objections unasked.'

'O Felix!'

'What?'

'Is not that rather "Am I my brother's keeper?"'

'I hope not. You see, the sort of fatherly relation I bear to you all has never existed towards her. She was given quite away; and where I do not suppose even a father's remonstrance would

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avail, I do not feel called upon to alienate her further by uplifting my testimony unsought.'

'No, it would hardly do her good; but it would clear your own conscience.'

'It might bring dissension and harsh judgment on my conscience. Nothing can be most conscientious that is not most for another's good; and I do not think forcing an additional opposition or remonstrance, on mere grounds of my own estimate of him, would be useful. You observe, too, that our cool manner of treating this brilliant match is token enough of our sentiments.'

'Then you won't go to the wedding?'

'Not if I can help it; and I don't think my company is desired. Remember,' as he still saw her dissatisfied, 'it is not the same thing to be an overt scamp as to be what you and I do not think a religious man.'

With a sudden impulse Cherry burst out laughing. 'If the great Sir Adrian could only see what the little country bookseller thinks of his alliance?'

'Don't let pride peep out at the holes in our cloaks,' said Felix, kissing her.

She could not refuse herself the satisfaction of letting Marilda hear the real history of the accident; but she could extract nothing but 'Indeed.'

Altogether, Marilda disappointed Cherry. She went so entirely along with the stream, only now and then remorselessly giving way to a tremendous fit of crossness towards every one except her father, never seeming scandalized by any doing of Alda's, and snubbing Cherry if she showed any sort of disapprobation.

Felix stole the first hour of his busy day for Ferdinand, and then was distressed to leave him outstretched in his dull, close, noisy den, ill adapted for the daylight hours of anything but blue-bottle flies; though neither heat nor idleness was quite so trying to him as they would have been to an Underwood. He had a cigar and newspaper; but when books were proposed to him, allowed that reading bored him. When Felix shifted the cushions, however, under them was a deep devotional mystical work; and colouring a little, he owned that nothing interested him but reading and slowly digesting fragments of this kind. And Felix felt that it

would be unreasonable to regret the snapping of the tie that bound him to Alda.

After some hours of business in the City, Felix came back, but was amazed to hear that Mr. Travis was gone. The landlady seemingly rather hurt at the slur on her attentions, said that an elderly lady had come and taken him away, leaving an address. This led Felix into Finsbury Square, where he was started to see waiting at the door a big carriage, the panels and blinkers displaying the Underwood rood. On his asking for Mr. Travis, a neat young maid took him to a downstairs room, where Ferdinand was lying on a large sofa, accepting luncheon from a big stout housekeeper-looking body, and—Marilda Underwood, her bonnet off, as if quite at home!

'Felix!—Granny, have you never seen Felix Underwood!'

Mrs. Kedge turned round and held out her hand. 'I've never seen Mr. Felix Hunderwood,' she said; 'but there's no gentleman I 'olds in 'igher respect.—Sit down Mr. Felix, and take your bit of noonchine.—Mary, give him some weal.—I could have had some soup if I'd known I was to be so honoured; but I am a plain body, and likes a cut from the servants' dinner—and so does Mary, for a change. So,' before he could insert his civil reply, 'Vell, we've brought off your friend; I 'ope you think him in good 'ands.'

'The kindest hands,' said Felix; though, as good Mrs. Kedge discoursed on hopodeldoc and winegar as sovereign for a sprain, he began to think the change a doubtful good, and was glad Ferdinand seemed chiefly sensible of the motherly care of the old lady.

Marilda offered her cousin a seat in the carriage, when after the meal she set forth to take her father home, there to hold conference with Mr. Murray and the lawyer.

'This is your doing,' he said, gratefully, as they drove off. 'How very kind!'

'Grandmamma always liked him,' said Marilda. 'He is so respectful, and he plays backgammon.'

'It is much better for him than that doleful room, which was only made endurable by its being near his friends the curates.'

'They will come to him there. Granny does not mind. She used to think they starved Clement; but of late they have come to

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be great friends with her, and come to her for rag, or broth, or hospital tickets.'

'Does she go to their church?'

'Oh no, she wouldn't to save her life—she thinks it quite shocking; and there are two young merry ones who have regular quarrels with her, teazing and making fun, and she scolding them, but so fond of them, giving them quite large sums for their charities. She really delights in them.'

Marilda spoke far more freely to Felix than she ever could to Cherry, but still she steered clear of Alda and her affairs. Only she did ask him earnestly to avert all additional care and anxiety from her father in arranging for the settlements, and above all to hinder any question over which he could become excited. Then, as he promised to do all in his power, she asked him what he thought of her father's health and looks. He could truly say that he thought he was much better since last autumn, and she looked cheered; but the few words she whispered made it known to him that she was all this time living in a watchful state of continual anxiety—being in truth the only person, except perhaps Edgar, who really understood what last year's attack had been, or the dangers of another. If her mother and Alda knew, they did not realize; and he could perceive both the burthen, and the manner in which it rendered her almost passive, except in obviating discussion or alarm.

Of the former there was no danger at the conference. Mr. Murray was just as anxious as Mr. Underwood and Felix could be, that the five thousand pounds that had been promised to Alda should be settled upon herself and the younger children, together with a fair proportion charged upon the estate. He was a pleasing person, a perfect gentleman, of mildly cordial manners, accepting his new connections with courtesy and kindness. He was evidently charmed with Alda, whom he wanted to take home with him to be introduced to Lady Mary, before returning to choose her outfit. This was to be completed by the end of the month, that the honeymoon might interfere as little as possible with the moon fatal to partridges.

Felix was right. His presence was not desired. The father's part naturally belonged to Thomas Underwood; and though an

invitation was not wanting, Alda did not remonstrate when Felix spoke of the assize week requiring him to be at Minsterham, and of Charles Froggatt having come home in such a broken state of health, that his father's presence in Bexley could never be depended upon. She had no desire to display the full dozen *geschwister;* but to Cherry she qualified things a little: 'I suppose as Felix will not come, one of you will stay with him?'

'Of course I shall! You know I'm wedded!' And she merrily held Lord Gerald's ivory visage close to her own.

'I knew you would shrink from it. And those two children at Brompton—it will be the middle of their holidays, and it will not be worth while having them; besides, it would be encroaching, as Uncle Tom gives all those dresses—and one never knows what that Angel might do.'

'Never,' said Cherry, in full acquiescence, and sure of the same from Wilmet.

'But Wilmet and Stella must come. One of the little Murrays will pair with Stella; and I want Adrian to see her. You will not feel slighted, Cherry; I know you had rather not.'

'Much rather not,' said Cherry, for Alda was really speaking considerately. Indeed, Alda was taking such a leap out of the same sphere, that she could afford to be gracious to 'the little deformed one,' as Sir Adrian most inappropriately termed Geraldine. She graciously accepted for a wedding-present an intended portrait of Stella, and rejoiced heartily at Cherry's prize for the life-study.

Never had Cherry, however, been happier than in getting home, away from constraint, away from fine houses, away from half-comprehended people, back to free affection and mutual understanding.

'One's own cobweb for ever! The black caterpillar is crawling home again to the dear old nettle!' she cried.

'But you are not sorry to have gone,' said Felix.

'If only to get back again.'

'But they were kind.'

'I don't want people to be kind; I want them to be one with me.'

'My dear! you did not seem unhappy. We thought you enjoyed yourself.'

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'I did. I was only unhappy once. I liked things very much and shall more, now I have time. It was such a bustle and whirl; and I felt so obliged to make the most of it, that it seemed to wear my senses. Don't you see, it was like snatching at flowers; and now I can sit down to make up my nosegay, and see what I have gained.'

Cherry almost expected Wilmet to decline, in her hatred of finery and her general dissatisfaction; but Wilmet's love of Alda was too strong for her not to long to be with her at such a crisis of her life, and she was eager to accept the invitation, without fearing that the effects of her absence would be as direful as in the previous year.

The party at home were not by any means disconsolate. Felix was very busy, for Charles Froggatt had come home, a repentant prodigal, and slowly sinking under the disease that had carried off his more worthy brothers; and the father could seldom persuade himself to leave him for long together, and besides, needed cheering and comfort from his young friends. But Lance and young Lamb were working well and helpfully; and William Harewood spent almost as much time at Bexley as his brother had done.

He had passed his examination with flying colours, and had previously matriculated at Oxford; and thus being emancipated from the choir, which had kept him close at home, he seemed to think it liberty to be always at Bexley. As a Harewood, Wilmet let him do as he would—sleep in the barrack, and be like one of their own boys; and Lance's neighbourhood seemed to be all he wanted, though little of Lance's company was to be had, except in walking to see him bathe in early morning, and in long walks after seven in the evening—and for these the long July days gave ample verge. Robina, Angel, and Bernard often benefited by these expeditions into the dewy fields, redolent of hay, and came home to that delightful twilight that seems as if it would never be darkness.

Bill professed perfect content in the day hours. He was a voracious reader, and would remain for hours in the reading-room intent on some pursuit; and what perhaps was a still greater attraction, he could talk, and find listeners.

Cherry only now understood what Lance had always maintained —that that shock-headed boy was full of thought, poetry, and

ability. He had shed his school-boy slough; and he had moreover adopted the Underwoods, and for the first time learnt what an appreciative woman could be.

His poem of this year was so good, that Lance and Robin thought Felix shockingly blind because he refused to put it bodily into the Pursuivant, though allowing that it was much better than anything that would appear instead; and short pieces that the lad was continually striking off were only too good for the poet's corner, where, however, they gave an infinity of pleasure and satisfaction to two households at least. The poet—March Hare, as he signed himself—was an odd mixture of his father's scholarly tastes with his mother's harum-scarum forgetfulness; and the consequence was such abstraction at one moment, such slap-dash action at another, that he was a continual good-natured laughing-stock. To talk and read to Cherry seemed to be one of his great objects in life. He began it with Robina; but gradually Cherry, partly as critic and sub-editor of the Pursuivant, partly on her own merits, became the recipient of ten thousand visions, reflections, aspirations, that were crowding upon the young spirit, while she tried to follow, understand, and answer, with a sense that her powers were being stretched, and her eyes opened into new regions.

And then, if a stranger appeared, he sank into the red-headed lout; or if he had a message or commission, he treated it senselessly. Lance used to send Bernard up—as he said, to see him into the right train; and in the home party in the evening, his wit and drollery were the cause of inexhaustible mirth—Willie, as Robin and Angela agreed, was better fun than all the weddings, and even all the sights that London could give. Sometimes they were weary with laughing at him, sometimes with the lift he gave their minds; for even Angel understood and followed, and was more susceptible than her elders gave her credit for; and certainly she had never been so good as she was this summer, though it was still a flighty odd sort of goodness.

And all this time there was not a word between him and Robin of that evening walk. Whether he thought of it or not she knew not; but with her the recollection had a strength that the moment had not had. It seemed to be growing up with her. It was a memory that went deeper—far deeper than was good for her, poor

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child, since there was no surface chatter to carry it off; but the maidenliness of fifteen shrank with a sort of horror and dismay from the bare consciousness that she had allowed herself to think that those words of his could be serious, even while they had formed in her a fixed purpose of striving for him; and every mark of kindness or of preference assumed a value unspeakable and beyond her years, while her whole self was so entirely the good, plodding, sensible, simple child, that no one detected the romance beneath. Did the object of it, himself?

Meantime Wilmet had found Alda much gratified by her reception at the Rectory, though confessing that she was glad that it was not in her immediate neighbourhood. Lady Mary Murray belonged to a severe school of religious opinions, and was antagonistic to gaiety and ornament, both secular and ecclesiastic. What effect they and Clement might have mutually had upon each other was not proved, for he had found a pupil, and was far away; but as Alda herself owned, Wilmet would have been the daughter-in-law to suit them.

Wilmet and Marilda were very congenial in their housewifely tastes and absence of romance, and above all, in a warm and resolutely blind love for Alda, never discussing the past, and occupied upon the trousseau, without an *arrière pensée.*

Sir Adrian was civil to Wilmet, but he never would acknowledge the resemblance between the twin-sisters; and as Wilmet wore no earrings, and kept her hair in the simple style that John Harewood had once pronounced perfect, he had only once been confused between them, and then was so annoyed, that Edgar said he was like a virtuoso, who having secured some unique specimen, finds the charm of possession injured by the existence of a duplicate.

Even in the Murray family there might be those who questioned whether the beauty were equal. Either the smooth folds and plaits of the rich brown hair pleased a homely taste better than fanciful varieties, or housewifery and early hours were better preservatives than London seasons; or maybe the stately sweetness of the original mould was better and more congenially maintained in the life of the true 'loaf-giver or lady' of the laborious thrifty home than in the luxurious dependence of the alien house, and the schemes, disappointments, and successes of the late campaign.

At any rate, at three-and-twenty the twins were less alike than of old; and if Alda had the advantage in the graces of art and society, Wilmet had a purity of bloom and nobleness of countenance that she could not equal. If Wilmet were silent, and by no means so entertaining as Geraldine, her little companion thoroughly compensated for any deficiencies. Every one was taken by surprise by Stella's beauty, after the three intermediate sisters, who had little pretensions to anything remarkable in that line. The child was of the same small delicate frame as Cherry and Lance; in fact, much what Cherry might have been with more health and less genius to change those delicately-moulded features and countenance. The colouring of the blue eyes and silken hair was rather deeper than the prevailing tint, and the complexion was of the most exquisite rosy fairness and delicacy, giving a sense of the most delicate porcelain—the movements and gestures perfectly graceful, and the innocent chatter delightful, from its eagerness and simplicity. She was in every one's eyes an extraordinarily lovely and engaging child; and she could have reigned supreme over the whole house if she had ever perceived her power, or emancipated herself from her loyal submission to 'Sister.'

Many a time did Wilmet's restrictions vex her hosts, and call forth Edgar's epithets of dragon and Medusa. Luckily the child was of the faithful spirit that honestly trusts its lawful authorities, fears forbidden sweets, and feels full compensation in the pleasure of obedience. One day, when a refusal to take her to the theatre had caused great indignation, Sir Adrian, who was by no means insensible to her charms, enlivened an idle moment by trying to excite her to rebel.

'I would not stand it, Stella—not I! Tell her stars have no business to be hidden.'

'It's no use,' said Stella. 'Sister says when once she says No, it is for always.'

'How very dreadful! She must be cured as soon as possible!'

Stella looked greatly perplexed; and Edgar, the only other person present, looked on in great amusement.

'Let us organise a combination,' continued Sir Adrian. 'What should we come to, if women were allowed to keep to a single No?'

'Which would be the greatest sufferers?' muttered Edgar.

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'It would be very nasty if Sister didn't,' said Stella, understanding him verbally more nearly than he had expected.

'Indeed!' said Sir Adrian.

'Yes. One would never know when to make up one's mind.'

'One's mind! You little china fairy, have you got the mind of a midge?'

'Yes, *I* have!' said Stella, with an emphasis that Edgar at least understood as an allusion to the difference between herself and Theodore; and a little in fear of what might come next, he said, 'Mind enough to assert her woman's privilege, though how she may come to like to be bound by it is another thing.'

'Look here, little one,' continued Sir Adrian, 'we'll not let Sister alone till she comes round, and then I'll put you in my pocket and take you.'

'No, thank you,' said Stella, retreating.

'I thought you wanted to see the fairies?'

'I did; but Sister knows best.'

'Come, now; I'd give something to know where, in her secret soul, this little thing would like to send all the sisters that know best?'

'To the Neilgherry Hills,' said Stella, with surprising promptness; 'that's where Captain Jack is!'

'A capital location!' cried the baronet, laughing triumphantly. 'Well done, little one! Send her off—and then we'll have pine-apple ice, and smart frocks, and go to as many plays as we please! You know what it means to have the cat away.'

'That was what Bernard said when Wilmet was away, and Alda at home,' said Stella; 'but it was very miserable. It was the very horridest portion in the whole course of our lives!'

'Long may it so continue, Stella,' said Edgar. 'You'll get no change out of her, Vanderkist.'

'It's an odd little piece of goods. I can't make out if it is a child at all,' said Sir Adrian. 'I can't believe it is more than drilling. —Now, my little beauty—no one will tell—walls can't hear—honour bright—which are you for in your heart of hearts—Sister Wilmet and propriety, or Alda and—liberty?'

Edgar listened curiously; but Stella had that good genius of tact and courtesy that sometimes inspires children; and she made

answer, 'Wilmet is my own dear sister, and I am very glad it is Alda that you have got.'

'Well said, you little ingenious morsel!' cried Edgar, laughing with delight, and catching her up in his arms. 'What does nature design this little being for, Adrian? To marry a great diplomate?'

'To do execution of some sort, I should say,' returned Sir Adrian; 'unless such alarming discretion cancels the effect of those eyes. Never saw a pair more meant to make hearts ache,' and he sauntered out of the room.

'Why, what now, you star of courtesy? has he kindled the spark of vanity at last, that you are craning over to the big pier-glass—eh?' said Edgar, with his little sister still in his arms.

'I only want to see what he means that is so horrid in my eyes,' said Stella; 'please show me, Edgar. How can they hurt people so?'

'It's a way they have, Stella,' he gravely answered, 'when they are clear, and blue, and big-pupilled, and have great long black lashes.' And he looked with proud pleasure at the reflection of the sweet little puzzled face beside his own brown beard.

'But your eyes are just like that, Edgar; and so are everybody's, aren't they? Why do you laugh, Edgar? I wish I could go home, for I don't understand any of you.'

'So much the better, Sister would say. I declare, I must risk it, and see the effect. I say, Stella, don't you know that you're a little beauty, that they are all raving about? There!'

'Oh yes,' said Stella composedly; 'I know people always do like things for being little, and young, and pretty. And then they don't see Tedo, and he is so much prettier than me, you know.'

'You impracticable child! What! have you no shade of a notion that it is a fine thing to have such a phiz as that one? Did you never thank your stars that you weren't as ugly as Martha?'

'Do you worship the stars, Edgar? For I heard Clem say you were very little better than a heathen; and I suppose worshipping the stars is better than worshipping idols.'

'Is that malice, or simplicity—eh? Never mind my creed. You are my sister at this moment, and are to answer me truly. Do you know that you are a beauty? and are you glad of it?'

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'I shouldn't like to be ugly,' said Stella; 'not so ugly that I couldn't bear to look at myself. But if I was, they wouldn't leave off being kind to me at home.'

'Nor abroad either,' said Edgar, kissing her. 'You've got the tongue that is nearly equal to the eyes, my Stella.'

Stella's simplicity might soon have been put in the way of further trials, for there was a serious proposal of adopting her in Alda's room, and promises of excellent education and an ample provision: and when Felix's decided though grateful refusal arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Underwood spoke angrily of his folly, as selfish, and almost undutiful to his father, who had freely trusted them with the two elders; but Edgar cut this short. 'No, no, my dear good governor. That won't do; Felix knows that if my father could have seen the results, he would ten times rather have let us fight it out in the Irish cabin at home.'

'I am sure,' exclaimed Mrs. Underwood, 'we have done everything for you, Edgar! It is enough to cure one of offering to do anything for any one!'

'Just what I say,' was Edgar's grave response; but he added, with his natural sweetness, 'Not but that I believe, in the common herd, we should have been, if anything, worse than we are now. We brought the bad drop with us. You did not infuse it.'

'Speak for yourself, Edgar,' said Marilda, rushing to the defence, as usual.

So the family was only represented by two sisters and one brother at the wedding, which was solemnized by Mr. Murray at the parish church, and was a regular common-place smart affair, with carriages, favours, and crowds of spectators in much excitement to catch a sight of the beautiful bride.

Murrays mustered in force, and Mrs. Underwood's felicity was complete; for the titled uncle was so glad to see his Sister Mary happy about her son, that he came in full state, and made a very gratifying speech all about nothing. While Wilmet thought of her own soldier on the Neilgherry hills, and felt how widely her path and that of her twin-sister must diverge. And Mr. Underwood enjoyed the compliments to the 'more than father,' and congratulated himself on having truly done well by poor Edward's child.

'I only wish he were here to see her!' he cried with an effusion of almost tearful delight, as he handed Lady Vanderkist to her carriage. CHAP. XXVII.

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STARS GRATIS.

'Back to the cell, and mean employ,
Resume the craftsman and the boy.'
Browning.

THREE months later there was another family gathering, but it was for Thomas Underwood's funeral.

It had come very suddenly. Spa had been given up in favour of Brighton; and there what had seemed a slight casual ailment had been followed by a recurrence of the disease, and a stroke came on which terminated life in a few hours.

Mrs. Underwood was prostrated; but Marilda managed everything, with the help of Spooner, the confidential clerk. She wrote to Felix that he was joint executor with herself, and that as her father had wished to be buried at Centry, he should give orders. Edgar had gone abroad, and no one knew where to write to him.

The chosen burial-place was quite in accordance with poor Mr. Underwood's desire to restore the family. Every year he had made an effort to reside there, and been as regularly frustrated by his wife's predilection for German baths, and dislike to the Bexley neighbourhood. Hers had been the dominion of a noisy tongue, and of ready tears and reclamations, but, poor woman, she was quite passive between the two stronger spirits of her mother and her daughter, who brought her down to Centry the day before the funeral. Mrs. Kedge led her away at once to her room; but Marilda stood in the hall, excited, yet business-like, discussing arrangements with Felix, in that prompt, lucid, all-considering manner that sometimes springs out of the pressure of a great affliction, settling every detail with eager peremptoriness—as, for instance, finding that Felix had intended his brothers only to meet the procession in the grave-yard, she vehemently stipulated that

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they should come to the house, and be transported in carriages like the rest. Her mother would not go, and would be left with Mrs. Kedge; but she herself was resolved on being present, with Felix for her supporter.

'You will like to have Wilmet with you?' he asked.

'I thought Wilmet would have been here now,' she said, as if disappointed.

'Alda is coming by the five o'clock train; and she thought you had rather be together.'

'But you will stay?' she earnestly entreated.

Alda arrived, weeping so much that she had to be taken upstairs at once. The occupation and excitement were perhaps good for Marilda, who was in a restless tearless state, only eager to be doing something for some one. She sat at the head of the dinner-table, Mr. Spooner at the foot; but the conversation was chiefly due to the instinctive habits of good breeding belonging to Sir Adrian, whose 'go through with it' air was not unlike what he had worn at his wedding.

When the ladies went away, he inquired what was known about the will; but Felix knew nothing, and if Mr. Spooner knew, he would not say. Thereupon Sir Adrian became silent, and asked the way to the smoking-room, whither Mr. Spooner deemed it needful to follow, while Felix repaired to the drawing-room.

He thought it empty; but Alda's head looked round the tall back of an easy-chair.

'Felix, is it you? I was nearly asleep.'

'Are you tired?'

'Yes, rather. It is such a shock—and my poor aunt's grief! It is so frightful to see a large person give way; it makes me quite ill. Where's Adrian?—smoking?'

'Yes.'

'That's man's way of getting out of trouble. If poor Marilda could smoke, she would not be half so restless and wretched. She has been up and down here four or five times in ten minutes. It wears one out!'

'She will be calmer when the bustle is over.'

'She tells me that you are executor with her.'

'I am afraid so.'

'Afraid! why?'

'Of the complication of business of which I have no experience, and that must be thoroughly looked into.'

'Now, for my part,' said Lady Vanderkist, 'I should have expected you to be gratified at such a mark of confidence.'

'So I am, Alda. It is not want of gratitude; it is only that I wish I were better qualified.'

'You understand business.'

'Understanding my own business shows me how little I know of other people's.'

'It would not be other people's, if you take this as it is meant. There can be no doubt that he meant to pave the way. Don't look so senseless and uncompromising, Felix; you must have heard Edgar say so!'

The colour glowed into Felix's face as he answered, 'You have not been so silly as to take Edgar's nonsense in earnest?'

'It is absurd in you to pretend simplicity,' said Alda, sitting upright, and looking at him earnestly. Here is such an opportunity as you may never have again. This arrangement must have been made on purpose to remove all scruples.'

'Nay, Alda,' interrupted Felix, in a tone of regret and shame at the subject and the time. 'If there were no objection, this arrangement would be the greatest in itself,' and as she looked at him incredulously, 'don't you see that he has set me to do a brother's part to her? anything to interfere with that would be both unfair and cruel.'

'She knows nothing of such ridiculous refinements as you work yourselves up to. Besides no one wishes you to do anything at once; only you ought to have it in your mind, and might be making way all the time.—Felix,' as she saw his face and gesture, 'you don't mean that you are so absurdly fastidious. I call that quite wrong—in your position, too—and when she is the dearest best-hearted girl in the world!' added Alda, with more genuine feeling.

'True, Alda; I esteem her goodness and generosity too highly to treat her with the disrespect and insincerity such a course would imply.'

'Nonsense! as if it would not be the greatest kindness to save her from fortune-hunters!'

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Felix smiled. 'What should I be myself?' he said. 'I must speak plainly, to put this out of your head. Nothing else would lead me to this, and in me it would be especially abominable, because I am the only man in the family able to be of any use to her; and besides, I am not only poor, and in a lower grade, but I have so many dependent upon me.—Don't you see?'

'I only see that you are obstinate and unreasonable, throwing away all my pains to guard her for you!'

Felix could not but laugh a little ironically as he said, 'Thank you.'

'You think it mere fancy,' said Lady Vanderkist, nettled into proving her words by an exposure of herself; 'but she would have had that young Travis two years ago, if I had not managed to give him a hint before he got involved.'

'Alda!' He started up, and stood over her, speaking low, but with pain and horror inconceivable. 'Alda, if you had not told me this, I should not have believed it. I do not believe you now.'

Alda had the grace to colour violently under the force of his indignation. 'Well, well,' she said, 'of course it was not only that. No one out of a novel would be so disinterested without a little bit of infatuation besides; but it is of no use recollecting these things now, when they are gone by.'

This was so incontrovertible that Felix made no answer, and was glad that Marilda returned, trying to work off her restlessness by ringing all the possibilities of Edgar's seeing the announcement in the 'Times,' and coming home.

Felix was still too much stunned to reply freely, and took his leave as soon as possible. He walked home, finding no solace for his dismay at the usage of Ferdinand, save in plans which his better sense knew to be impracticable for bringing Ferdinand and Marilda together; but the match which might have been easily accomplished as a veritable *mariage de convenance*, could not be contemplated by an almost penniless clerk. Moreover, the heart had been given away, and Felix could not believe that it would be possible to turn to Marilda from one of his own graceful sisters. Even though the essential vulgarity of Alda's nature had been so painfully evident, the delicate contour of her face, her refined intonation and pronunciation, and elegance of appearance and

manner, returned on him in contrast with poor Marilda's heavy uncouthness, and the shock she inflicted on his taste by plain speaking—worse in manner, if better in matter.

On his return home, he found that Edgar had arrived, having travelled day and night ever since the tidings had met his eye. He was very much tired, and genuinely grieved and overcome, too much even to battle with the manifestation of his feelings. Always affectionate, he mourned for one who had, as he said, been far kinder to him than he deserved, and though often angered with him, had pardoned and overlooked his offences with the partiality of a father. That their final farewell had been one of sharp remonstrance on the one hand, and of gay defiant coolness on the other, added poignancy to his regret; and there was so much more of actual self-reproach than usually came from his tongue, that a gleam of hope glanced through the minds of Felix and Cherry that this shock might be the beginning of better things.

They certainly had never seen him so subdued as when he set out for Centry the next morning with his brothers and Wilmet; and the meeting with Marilda was like that of an orphan brother and sister. With all her esteem and confidence for Felix, her affection for Edgar was a much warmer and more instinctive feeling; and the sight of him brought her tears freely and heartily, while she told him the history of her father's last hours, and his gentle warmth of manner soothed and comforted her.

He was sent for to her mother's dressing-room; and when he left it only to join the funeral party, he looked pale, shaken, and overwhelmed by grief he had shared as well as witnessed. The position of son of the house seemed his right. It was he who led Marilda to the carriage, and handed in first her, then Wilmet followed. Felix was just about to step in, when another person thrust forward, and had his hand on the door, when Edgar said, 'I believe my brother comes with us,' and 'Come Felix,' was hastily murmured from under Marilda's veil. He obeyed, and met a shrug and scowl of displeasure and amazement; but nothing could be thought of except poor Marilda's choking sobs under her veil.

It is one curious effect of good breeding, that while in one class publicity seems to stifle the expression of grief, in another it

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enhances it; and when Marilda's excitement had once dissolved in tears, her agitation became so excessive, that her cousins watched her anxiously, Wilmet attempting all that salts and kind pressures of the hand could do, and the brothers supporting her, when she clung to Edgar's arm, as if resting her whole weight on him, when the movement to the church began.

It was one of the regular conventional, and therefore most oppressive of funerals, with a great array of pall-bearers, friends from London, and a train of persons with whom Thomas Underwood had been associated; and after all was over, most of them came to a great cold luncheon, which was to occupy them till the next train.

There they trooped, a black multitude, into the dreary big dining-room; and Felix, knowing nobody, and unwilling to take the lead, was much relieved when Edgar returned from taking Marilda upstairs and went round with greetings and replies to every one. When he came to the gentleman who would have entered the carriage, he said, 'Good morning, Fulbert. Here—my eldest brother.'

Felix held out his hand, but met an ungracious bend. 'You muster strong here,' were the words, chiefly addressed to Edgar.

'I am sorry not to show you any more of us,' said Edgar, with a spice of malice; 'the others have walked home.'

Then Felix made some courteous inquiry for the elder Fulbert, and was answered in the coldest and haughtiest of tones, and the Vicar of Vale Leston turned away. In this company, all in mourning, he would not have been taken for a clergyman, chiefly from a sort of free-and-easy air about his dress, and his unclerical cast of countenance, which was wearied, bored and supercilious.

'Take the other end of the table,' indicated Edgar; but Felix would have abstained, had not Mr. Harford summoned him by a look; and another scowl from the Reverend Fulbert was the consequence.

Before long that gentleman was examining the lawyer as to when the will was to be read; and hearing in return that so few were concerned that there was to be no public opening. Did Miss Underwood know that he—Fulbert—was here?—Yes, certainly.—He should like to see her and her mother. Mr.

Harford applied to Edgar, who undertook to ascertain whether they would wish it.

'What can it be for?' said Marilda, who was sitting between the twin sisters, calm, though spent with weeping, and unusually gentle.

'To warn you against us,' said Edgar. 'He is ready every moment to insult Felix; but if you can bear it, you had better face him, or he will say we beset you, and let no one have access to you.'

'That would be better than his teazing her,' said Wilmet.

'No, I don't mind whom I see now,' said Marilda. 'I must stand alone. Send him to me in the library, Edgar.'

This left Wilmet for the first time alone with Alda, longing to enter fully into her sister's new life, and hearing that Ironbeam Park was delightful; beautiful house, splendid drawing-rooms, beautiful grounds, sheet of water, swans, deer, good neighbourhood, people calling, dinner invitations without number, guests who had had to be put off. There was a little attempt at complaint at being overwhelmed by the welcome, but pleasure and exultation were visible enough; only it seemed to Wilmet that there was more of the splendour and less of the Adrian, than she would have expected. Marilda soon came back.

'Well, was it as Edgar said?' asked Alda.

'He offers his wife to come and stay with me.'

'I dare say!'

'I shouldn't wonder if he meant to be kind!'

'Now, Marilda, you aren't going to let yourself be talked over!' cried Alda.

'He is my relation,' said Marilda, bluffly, in a tone that showed she meant to be mistress of her own actions. 'I came back to say that there are things to be done. There are Felix and Edgar walking in the garden; I want them in the library.'

She was going to ring to have them summoned; but Wilmet undertook to fetch them, going through an ante-room with a glass door; which she was just unfastening, when she heard a voice behind her—'Holloa, where are you going now?' She perceived her brother-in-law, lounging on a sofa with a newspaper.

'I am looking for my brothers.'

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'I say, haven't I told you that I'll not have you eternally running after that concern?'

She faced about, and looked full at him with her grave eyes, and neck held like a stag's.

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered. 'This confounded mourning makes everybody alike.'

She did not wait to hear more, but was gone as soon as the bolt had yielded.

The Tartar had shown himself without a scratch. Were these his domestic manners to his three months' bride?

She said nothing to her brothers, but brought them to the library, where Marilda was awaiting them, with the lawyer, Harford, and the manager, Spooner, to settle about the will.

Alda's five thousand pounds had been made over to her at her marriage, so that she was not mentioned. A large share in the mercantile house already belonged to Mrs. Underwood, and to her was bequeathed the lease of the Kensington house, with the furniture; but Centry Park was absolutely left to Mary Alda, the daughter, with all the property in the funds, or embarked in the business, coupled with a request that in case of her marriage she should carry with her the name and arms of Underwood. Among the legacies were fifteen hundred pounds to Felix Chester Underwood, and one thousand pounds apiece to Thomas Edgar, Theodore Benjamin, and Stella Eudora—Felix and Mr. Harford trustees for these last, with liberty to use the interest for their benefit, or let it accumulate, as might be best.

No one made any remark; and the lawyer was beginning to tell the two executors what immediate steps they must take, when Edgar rose, saying, 'I suppose I'm not wanted!'

Marilda jumped up. 'Edgar, you ain't vexed! Poor Papa thought the executorship might take time, trouble, and expense, that ought to be made up for.'

'Now, Polly,' said Edgar, with his sweet candid smile, 'you are not thinking me grudging dear old Fee anything man could give him! I only wish he had mine. He'd do some good with it;' and he fondly laid his hand on the shoulder of Felix, who, not being used, like him, to view Harford and Spooner as tame cats, had rather have had this more in private.

'You'll leave it in our hands, and let us make the most of it for you, Edgar,' said warm-hearted Marilda; 'that Pampas railway is never less than seven per cent., you know.'

'All very well, Poll, if the item could be suppressed when the will is blazoned abroad. It is not ingratitude, dear old girl. It is more than I deserve or expected, and will give me a hoist.'

'I hope—' began Marilda eagerly.

'Never mind me. The best part of it is that nest-egg for those babies.'

'It is indeed,' said Felix; 'I cannot express how thankful I am, especially for poor Theodore's sake.'

'It will not do much in the funds,' said Marilda, gratified; 'but leave it in our hands, and little Stella shall have quite a fortune. You will judge of our security when you look into our books.'

Marilda's habit of identifying herself with the firm had begun half in play years ago; and in fact, the house now chiefly consisted of herself, her mother, and grandmother, with Spooner, who had shares enough to give him a personal interest in the transactions.

'You do not mean to go on with the business?' asked Felix.

'Why not? I have worked at it, and like it much better than the piano or bead-work—and I can, can't I, Mr. Spooner?'

'We all know your competence, Miss Underwood. I would not wish for a more sagacious head, if—'

'Yes, if,' said Marilda more sadly; 'but you see, Felix, you may trust me. Let me keep your own and the twins, for you.'

'For the twins, I do not know how the law stands. Mr. Harford will tell me; but for myself, it may make a great difference to have this capital just now,' said Felix, who had already perceived what it might do for him.

Charles Froggatt had been dead about a month, and with him his father had lost all personal hope or interest in the business, and the few times he had come into the town, had shrunk from meetings even with old friends, and crept upstairs to talk to Geraldine. He wished to retire, and he would have liked to have put Felix Underwood, who had for nearly nine years been as a dutiful son, into a son's place; but he had relations to whom he must do justice, and he was unwilling to bring in a new partner, who might, as a moneyed man, lord it over Felix; while if he left things in their

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present condition till his death, the succession would pass to a family whom he knew to be uncongenial. All this had been discussed, but without seeing any way out of the difficulty, until in this legacy Felix saw the means of making himself master of the house and stock, and thus would obtain a footing as a citizen, by which he could profit as he gained in age and standing. The available income of the family would hardly be increased, since the absolute possession of the house involved expenses that had hitherto been paid over his head; but the security and independence were worth more than the pounds, shillings and pence that might otherwise have been brought in. The certain provision for the helpless Theodore also made Felix more free. The lawyer, his fellow trustree, greatly to Wilmet's satisfaction, would not allow the sum in trust to be invested in anything but government security, and as nothing was needed at present for the child, the interest might there accumulate in case of need.

Edgar showed himself much subdued by the change in the household. He never spoke plainly about his doings, and direct questions drove him to his retreat in the ludicrous. However, it could be inferred that in the recklessness induced by Alice Knevett's desertion, he had gone far enough to alarm himself, and behold some abyss of exposure and disgrace whence the legacy would retrieve him, and that he was resolved to pull up and begin upon a different course.

He talked eagerly and edifyingly of setting about a picture for exhibition, the proceeds of which might take him to Italy, to begin a course of study at Rome, where he might make a home for Cherry to come and work with him; and they built up a *Château en Espagne*, the more fervently in proportion to Cherry's want of faith therein. Hours were spent in devising and sketching subjects for *the* picture, or rather pictures, for Mr. Renville was very anxious that Geraldine should make a venture in water-colours, such as might at least make her known as a possible illustrator. Edgar's eye and advice were very useful to her; and she decided on one ideal subject—the faithful little acolyte, who while the priest slept on the cold morning,

> 'Turned and sought the choir,
> Touched the Altar tapers
> With a flake of fire.'

And likewise the sketches of Stella in different attitudes, which she had made with a view to Alda's picture, were worth working at with her utmost power.

For Edgar's own part, he had resolved on a scene which Cherry thought wild and impracticable, till he had dashed in his sketch of Brynhild asleep in the circle of fire, with Sigurd about to break through. There was something so bright and fiery, so expressive and powerful, in the hastily-designed and partly-coloured *ébauche* that Cherry gazed at it like something of weird and magical beauty, only longing for her master to see it, and own Edgar's genius.

Brynhild's model was Wilmet, who, much against the grain, was induced to let down all her mass of hair, and let Edgar pose her on the sofa squab with bare arms. In his mischief, however, he produced a counter pen-and-ink outline of Marilda in the same position, with all the pointed flames labelled with the names of various stocks and securities; while Sigurd's helmet disclosed Felix, armed with the 'Pursuivant,' and hesitating to plunge in. He might with equal propriety have drawn himself, his sister Alda thought, for on failing with Felix, she had actually whispered the same hint to him, but was met with the reply, 'Oh no, I am not bad enough for that.'

She was spending a week longer at Centry, that Sir Adrian might massacre the pheasants, which, however, he considered to be so disgracefully preserved, that he spent much time and eloquence in explaining to Miss Underwood how she might render her game a source of profit.

One November day, the last of the Vanderkists' stay at Centry, when the sisters had been sent for in the afternoon, and he and Lance were to follow for the evening, Felix, returning into his office, was amazed to see a figure standing at the fire.

'Ferdinand! what good wind brings you here?'

'I am come to say good-bye.'

'What? Mr. Brown sends you out to America?'

'No, it is on my own account. His correspondent at Oswego has telegraphed to him to find me, and let me know of my uncle's death.'

'Death!'

'Yes, I know no particulars.'

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'And are you his heir?'

'That I do not know. Probably. I cannot bring myself to care.'

'How much is it?'

'Brown knows of fifty thousand in stock that he can lay his hand upon; but there must be more than as much again afloat in the States, in goodness knows what speculations, and I shall have to deal with it all!'

'It is well you have had an apprenticeship. The Life Guardsman would have known less about it. When do you start?'

'I go back to town by the mail train to-night, to Liverpool to-morrow. I could not go without telling you; and when I tried to write, I felt I must see you and this place again. But you are going out.'

'We were, but we shall be glad to get off.'

'To Centry? Is she there?'

'Yes. Going early to-morrow.'

Before Ferdinand had done more than stare into the fire, Lance opened the door. 'Mr. Flowerdew wants—Holloa! Fernan dropped from the skies!'

'Is Mr Flowerdew there?' said Felix, about to pass him.

'No; he only wants you to write up to Novello's.—Do you hear, Fernan? we are to have *such* a concert in the town hall, for a real good organ. Edgar will bring down no end of stars for it. You'll come down for it?'

'Fernan will be in the utmost parts of America by that time, Lance.'

'Look here, Lance,' said Fernan—that dark sad countenance lighting as it sometimes did—'just you wait a fortnight, and I can all but promise you—'

'An organ by Atlantic cable, eh?' said Felix, laughing. 'Look at Lance, Fernan; he'd hardly thank you. It is the concert they want; the organ is the excuse.'

'Now, Felix, you are as much set on the concert as I am. He is to sing, "Return, blest days," rattled on Lance, too eager on his own hobby to draw the inference as to Fernan's fortunes; 'and Mr. Miles has promised to come himself with all our own fellows; and so we can have the sacred part something respectable. It is a horrid pity you can't come!'

'He will be better employed, Lance; he believes he is come into his fortune.'

'And if so, Felix, nothing can hinder me from my greatest possible pleasure, the giving this organ to St. Oswald's—the church of my baptism.'

'Well, Fernan, the bear is not caught yet, remember; but when it is, I'm not the man to hinder you from making up the deficit I strongly anticipate after this same concert of ours.'

'Felix! A hundred and sixty reserved seats at a guinea, and—'

Felix put up his hands to his ears. 'Meantime, Lance, find little Lightfoot, and tell him to get ready to take a note into the country.'

Ferdinand of course rose up, insisting on starting by the five o'clock train, but was withheld while Felix wrote a note to Marilda, in which he communicated the tidings, leaving it to her and to Wilmet to inform Lady Vanderkist.

The note was delivered in the expectant time before dinner, when Marilda, without any preliminary but 'Bless me! what does Felix write to me for?' read—

MY DEAR COUSIN,

You must have the kindness to excuse Lance and myself from joining your party to-night. We are unexpectedly prevented by the arrival of Mr. Travis, who has come down to take leave, having been telegraphed for to Oswego on his uncle's death. He must go back by to-night's mail train; and perhaps you would kindly send my sisters home a little earlier, as I think they would wish to see him.

Your affectionate cousin
F. C. UNDERWOOD.

'His uncle dead without a will! If we had but known!' said Mrs. Underwood, unguardedly.

'Insolvent, depend on it,' growled Sir Adrian, fitting on the consequence so that Cherry felt an uncontrollable impulse to giggle, and was glad to be sunk in the depths of a huge chair.

She was startled by Alda's answering rather fretfully, 'I don't see why—he was very rich.'

'The more reason. It is always the way with those Yankees.'

Mrs. Underwood took on herself to defend the solidity of the Travis interest as an article of her husband's belief; Wilmet and

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Cherry longed to change the conversation, but neither knew how; and it was Sir Adrian who found a fresh subject at last, on which the others willingly rode off.

They begged to have the carriage ordered at nine, and bade good-bye to Lady Vanderkist, who had good taste enough not to make another remark after the first into which she had been betrayed.

Marilda, however, did. 'Tell him I hope it is all right, and that I congratulate him with all my heart,' she said; and she looked as if she could have said more.

Perhaps Wilmet and Cherry were not sorry that Stella's being seated between them prevented discussion on the difference patience and constancy might have made. Wilmet, with her love for her sister, and recollection of that conjugal interpellation, might regret; while Geraldine, less prejudiced, felt that Ferdinand could hardly be pitied for the test that had spared him a wife with whom he could have so little in common; but both felt the contrast when they were met by Ferdinand, whose countenance, though not intellectual, was singularly noble, and full of a grand melancholy sweetness according with the regular outline and dark olive colouring, while the gentleness of his tone was not the conventional politeness of society, but somewhat of the old Spaniard enhanced by Christian grace.

For all that had come and gone, they were more comfortable with him now than when he had been Alda's exclusive property, and what was wanting in love had been made up in jealousy; but he was very low and sad; he had not come to the point of ceasing to regret Alda, and his native inertness shrank from the trouble and turmoil before him, when he had nothing to make riches valuable to him, and could not bear to be wrenched from the shadow of St. Matthew's, and tossed he knew not where in the West, among strangers and worse than strangers. But after all, the home party were soon caring most of all about their concert.

The St. Oswald's Choral Society did in fact give a concert every year, but in a very quiet way, aiming only at covering their own expenses, and seeking for no extraneous aid; but this was to be an affair on a very different scale. It had grown up no one knew how, under the influence of Mr. Flowerdew, and of two Miss

Birkets, daughters of a gentleman who lived out of the town but in the parish. They were enthusiastic young ladies, about thirty years old, who had been enough at Minsterham to have known 'little Underwood' in his glory there, and to take him up with all their might when they found him with renovated powers in the choral society.

He was 'little Underwood' still, and perhaps would always be so, for in spite of the start of growth he had so eagerly hailed, he would never be tall, but the slenderness of his bones, hands, feet, and general frame, made him look neatly and well made; and he was what every one called, very gentlemanlike in appearance. His face had not the beauty of some of the others, the colouring was pale, and there was nothing to catch the eye, till it lighted up into mirth or sweetness; and his manners, from their perfect simplicity and absence of self-consciousness, were always engaging. He was either a cypher, or else he had an inexpressible charm about him. When his violin-playing powers were discovered, the ladies made a point of getting up a piece on the piano in which he was to accompany them, and a prodigious quantity of practice it took. Lance had to walk over to them at least two afternoons in a week. Felix looked on it as patronage, and could not think how he could bear it; but Lance was too simple to perceive patronizing—a petticoat was always a petticoat to him, and a little lingering chatter in their drawing-room was his delight, a few friendly words over the counter enslaved him.

Those holidays came, as Felix well knew, much too often; and if he tried to keep the balance true by tenders of the like liberty to Ernest Lamb, Lance proved to have left his head behind him, and made mistakes, or still worse was guilty of neglects. When called to account, partly from pre-occupation, partly from easiness of temper, he really seemed incapable of taking a reproof, or understanding the enormity of his errors. Had these been the days of Redstone, there must have been an explosion; but young Lamb was one of those whom Lance unconsciously fascinated, and being used to sparing him in the early days when he was scarcely more than a convalescent, the good plodding lad took it for granted that the unmusical should set the musical free, toiled quietly after him to rectify his mistakes, was absolutely amazed when Mr. Underwood

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apologized to him for the unequal weight resting on his honest shoulders, and was by far the most shocked and distressed when at last the value of some careless piece of damage was imposed as a fine. Indeed, Lance viewed this as expiation, troubled his head no more about the matter, and was in far too transcendent a state to perceive that he was Felix's daily worry, provocation, and disappointment.

There was the hope that it would be only for a time, and that it would blow over the sooner that nothing was heard of Edgar or his stars. Lance was indeed so radiantly happy, that it was only when he was doing something very provoking indeed that it was possible to be displeased with him, and not even to Geraldine would Felix whisper the heart-sickening misgivings that came over him when he found himself experiencing exactly what Kedge and Underwood had gone through from Edgar.

The concert was to be just within the Christmas vacations, so that the performers would include Clement, and the audience Robina and Angela, besides William Harewood, who was to bring his sisters over. It was delicious to hear Lance's demands upon Wilmet, in his ecstasy at being once more with his own beloved Minsterham choir. And Wilmet's soft spot was Minsterham, as the rogue knew.

'Train comes in at five eleven. I say, Mettie, our fellows must come here before they go to tune up.'

'My dear Lance, there are five-and-thirty of them at least! It is quite impossible! Why they couldn't sit down!'

Lance whistled. 'I must have little Graeme, Mettie, the little chap has never been here.'

'Poor little Dick! Well I don't mind him.'

'And if he comes, he must bring little George Lee—he's only seven, and not fit to knock about with men and all.'

'Very well.'

'No more is his fellow—that mite of a Bennett that is come instead of Harewood. His brother was an uncommon good friend to me when I was a little squeaking treble.'

Wilmet swallowed the mite of a Bennett.

'And Poulter! You remember Poulter, surely, Wilmet.'

'Who used to come twice a day to ask after you. Yes, we must have him.'

'Then there's Oliver—our big bass! Oh! you must remember old Oliver with that grizzly beard, coming in and carrying me out like a baby the first day I went into the avenue.'

'That good-natured old man—only I should think he would be happier among his friends.'

'And Mr. Miles—'

'Really, Lance, I don't think Mr. Miles would wish to come.'

'Oh, you're afraid Jack will be jealous!—You know, Cherry, Miles was almost caught, he had the slyest little flirtation with Mettie when they thought I was asleep or delirious or something—'

'Delirious indeed to think so,' interrupted Wilmet indignantly; but Lance went on unheeding,

'And if the engineer hadn't been the sharpest, who knows if she wouldn't have got permanent lodgings in the organ gallery? and now you see she thinks poor Miles's heart is in such a state that she can't venture to let him come!'

'Ah!' said Cherry, gravely taking up the cue, and much amused at Wilmet's indignant blushes and innocent amazement. 'I've always understood that things go very deep with those sort of misogynists, when once they begin.'

'Now, Cherry, I didn't expect such nonsense in you!' exclaimed Wilmet. 'Mr. Miles is extremely welcome—just as any of Lance's friends are.'

'There, Lance,' laughed Cherry, 'there goes the wedge! Dick Graeme was the small end, then came the two little trebles, then the two basses, and now Mr. Miles himself and any of your friends. And I imagine all the five-and-thirty are your particular friends.'

'Why, all that are coming—except Rooke and Higgins, and they always were disgusting little cads, only one couldn't leave them out by themselves, as they would be eating dirt some way and getting not fit to sing; Rooke's got my part now—I always used to be the lady when there was any spooning going on out of an opera! and if we don't take them in hand they'll go and stuff themselves with pastry, and wash it down with cherry brandy, and won't be good for anything.'

'But there must be some senior to keep them in order.'

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'Oh! there's Black, but he will go to his cousin's in Long Street, and Charlie Harris, but he was next to me. If any one comes, Charlie must.'

'My dear, how many are there to come?'

'Well! four of the little chaps will be away for the holidays, and it is only six of the lay-vicars that ever do come out, and two of them have friends here, so it is only two more of them besides Mr. Miles, and but five more boys. Really, Wilmet, I know Mr. Miles and the Precentor would be for ever obliged, there's nothing they hate so much for us as knocking about hotels, and that's why we hardly ever went to any but private concerts.'

'Well, every one was so very kind last year, we do owe some return. I will see what Felix thinks.'

Felix, so far as he had time to think at all, was sure to be on the hospitable side, so that ended by a provision of cold meat and tea and coffee on the back-room table, and permission to Lance to bring in and feed whomsoever he pleased. After the concert, a regular supper was provided in the school for all the performers, and Wilmet was released from all concern except with stray womankind who might want shelter till the mail train.

The excitement went on increasing. To use Lance's expression, the tickets went off like wild-fire; Marilda took a large allowance for her servants and dependants.

The type of the programmes was all set up, and Lance had proudly carried the proof round the house, when a note arrived from Edgar.

'Prebels consent to come and give three National Magyar airs, expenses being paid. Engage rooms for them at the F. A. I trust this is in time to draw. I shall come down with them.'

T. E. U.

Here were the stars, after all! Lance crushed up his proof and played at ball with it in his ecstasy; and Felix—for all the trouble it gave him—was carried along and not much less delighted, as he sent Clement up to Mr. Flowerdew with the intelligence.

The brother and sister M. Stanislas and Mlle. Zoraya Prebel were not exactly in the first ranks of public singers, but were rated highly, and their fame, when making the round of the provinces with a company who performed varieties of characteristic national

music, had been quite enough to fire the souls of Bexley with ardour; nor did Felix murmur, although he had to stay away from the final choral society's rehearsal to provide for the programmes and hand-bills, without which the attraction of Mlle. Zoraya would remain unknown to the public. Time to put it into the Pursuivant' would have made all the difference!

But on that last supreme day, the excitement was such, that anybody was willing to do anything. Felix could do little but explain to people where their seats would be on the map of the town hall spread on the counter, and answer their questions about the Zoraya; Wilmet was over head and ears on her preparations for her entertainment, and would have been unable to get any help in laying out her table but Cherry's if Marilda had not come in to see what was going on, thrown herself into the business with zeal and promptitude, sent back to Centry for a supply of flowers, knives and forks, and done the work of half a dozen parlour-maids. Stella was obediently keeping Theodore out of mischief; and the other two girls were, with Bill Harewood, assisting a select party in decorating the town hall with evergreens; and Clement, who had to his dismay found a whole part made over to him by a young Bruce, who had an inopportune cold, was practising hard at the old piano (which, by-the-by, Lance had learned to tune); Mr. Flowerdew and the manager were catching the doubtful and putting them through their performances; and little Lightfoot was only preserved by his natural stolidity from utter distraction among the hundred different ways he was ordered at once. As for Lance, he tried to help every one, was too excited to keep at anything, and was usually scolded off from whatever he attempted till at last he shut himself up in the barrack with his violin, and practised till he was so desperate at the sense of his failures, that when Bill Harewood came in search of him, he was, as he mildly expressed it, hesitating whether to hang himself like Dirk Hatteraick on the beam.

'Well, come down, here's Miles as savage as a bear with a sore head—vows that he was very near turning back again when he saw your rose-coloured placard of the Zoraya at the station.'

'If he's sulky, that is a go!' exclaimed Lance, with a look of consternation, utterly overpowering his stage fright. 'Do you

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remember his putting us all out at the Deanery, because Miss Evans affronted him?'

'Well do I remember it! He boxed my ears for it so that they sung for a week!'

And the two ex-choristers went down, feeling much as when an anthem had gone wrong. The room was pretty well filled with their old comrades, but Lance only went from one to the other quietly shaking hands, and quaking for the future as he heard the organist thundering away to Wilmet and Cherry.

He hated singing women some degrees more than the rest of their sex, and above all Italian singing women, who never appreciated Handel. Cherry ventured to suggest that the lady was not Italian, but, if anything, Hungarian.

'Madam,' he answered in Johnsonian wrath, 'she is cosmopolitan, that is to say a half breed or quarter breed of everything, with neither home, nation, nor faith!'

'Do you know anything against her?' gravely asked Wilmet, with a view to the possible contingency of being desired to call upon her.

'I know enough in knowing her to be a second-rate *prima donna*. Faugh! Now and then comes a first-rate one who can't help it, and is as meek and simple as you might be; but when this sort of woman comes down as a favour, I know what that means! Who is to pay the debt you'll have?'

'They come for their expenses.'

He held up his hands. 'I'd ten times rather she came at a hundred guineas a night! Then you'd know what to be at! Whose doing is it?'

'My brother Edgar's.'

'Then I hope he is prepared to pay for it. That is, if she comes at all. You'll have a telegram to say she has a cold, and who is to announce it to an indignant audience?'

'I think you had better, Mr. Miles,' said Cherry daringly, 'for you will congratulate them upon it.'

'Isn't his face a caution?' whispered Bill to Lance. 'He never got such sauce before.'

'He likes it,' returned Lance, triumphantly rubbing his hands. 'Cherry could come over Pluto himself!'

And in effect, the lively gracious tongue of the one sister, and the calm beauty of the other, were producing a wonderful placability and good-humour; the lads who were feeding by relays in the back room ventured to talk and laugh above their breath, and the only fear was of a relapse when Marilda's carriage, with Mr. and Mrs. Spooner in it, called for Cherry, and the fascination had to be removed.

Lance was as much delighted to walk down with the choir, though he sorely missed his cap and gown, as was Will to go, as he said, like a gentleman, the only one except little Bernard available to escort the ladies. Robin was quite content, as he took to himself all the honour and glory of representing his brother, and giving an arm to the belle of the room, as he persisted in declaring Wilmet, though to well accustomed Bexley eyes, she was much more likely to appear as the school teacher.

They were a merry little snug party, those four sisters behind, with the three Harewoods; only Wilmet was rather scandalised by the titter of Grace and Lucy in their delight at being relieved from Mr. Miles's presence; and their excitement about Edgar, whom they viewed as the most beautiful vision that had ever dawned on them. Vain were Wilmet's endeavours to keep them in order by stern repressions of her own comparatively unoffending sisters, who had little attention to spare for nonsense, since Robina's whole soul was set on Lance's enjoying and distinguishing himself, and Angela was in an absolutely painful state of tension with expectation and anxiety for the star's appearance and Mr. Miles's temper.

Presently, after long waiting, there was a look of sensation and eagerness, and Felix, who had been detained to the last moment, came edging himself through the lines of chairs, his whiskers in their best curl, and his hair shining, to exchange a word with his outermost sister, who chanced to be Robin.

'All right, if the train is not late. Edgar has telegraphed. Is Cherry comfortable? I couldn't get away before. There's not a ticket left.'

Happy those that caught the whisper as Felix made his way up the lane, and was admitted through the orchestra; but there was still delay enough to allow some impatient stamping of feet to begin before the revolution in the programme could be settled

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which was to give these erratic meteors time to appear. Then at last came the overture, and the concert took its course. There was no doubt that Mr. Miles was accompanying in his best style; Angela was soon far too blissful for personal anxieties; but it was a great comfort to the sisters to be secure that all was right, when not only the three brothers—of whom they had seen and heard their share in the sacred part—but Edgar came forward. Any sisters might be proud of four such brothers—so bright, so straight, so strong and fair; Edgar, with his fine robust figure and silky beard, giving them altogether a distinguished look and character, though Clement's head was a little the highest, and Lance's voice was the sweetest and most remarkable in power and expression; but all were in wonderful accord and harmony. Any other audience would have encored the performance as something rare and exquisite; but the Underwood brothers and their glees were rather stock pieces at Bexley, and people wanted something new.

Lance's performance with the Miss Birkets was very correct, but not of the style calculated to produce any very lively sentiments among the uninitiated audience, who were on the tip-toe of expectation of the lady whose arrival had been notified in whispers, and hardly fully appreciating the best that either their own powers or the Minsterham choir could produce. The first part went by without her; and in the interval came hope in the shape of Lance, who made an incursion to ask his sisters how they liked it, and to impart that the Zoraya was safe come, but was supposed to be dressing. 'Mr. Miles said she would be dressing till midnight, and would be less worth hearing then than a decently trained choir-boy. But he's not sulky, after all; yet,' added Lance, with a look of brightness in his face, 'fancy his telling Fee that I played that remarkably well just now—truth and taste, he said—the old villain—only that the ladies would spoil my time if I didn't take care. And there's a sallow-faced fellow come down with Mademoiselle, who said it wasn't bad either!'

No wonder Lance was exalted; and he required equal admiration for all his favourites, until he had to hurry back again.

A little of what seemed to the excited commonplace—then came the event of the evening. The glistening silken lady, with a flashing emerald spray in her dark hair, lustrous eyes of a colour

respecting which no two persons in the room agreed, and a face of brilliant beauty, was led bowing forward, and her notes, bird-like, fresh, and clear, rang through the room, her brother accompanying her. It was a strong clear voice, and the language and air being alike new, entranced every one; the applause was vehement, the encoring almost passionate; but the lady would not be encored, she gave them two songs alone, one with her brother, accompanied this time by Lance's 'sallow-faced fellow;' and though she smiled and curtsied graciously, was not to be induced to repeat herself.

It seemed to Robina as if the lady herself and the whole public had taken a great deal of trouble for a very brief matter; but she found it was rank treason to say so, when at the conclusion of the whole, those faithful brothers hurried down each to pick up a sister and bestow her safely at home before repairing to the Fortinbras Arms for the great supper to the Minsterham choir. The Bexley public had been favoured beyond all desert or reason; the newness of the airs had been a perfect revelation to Lance's ears, and he was very angry with Clement for being disappointed, and repeating Mr. Miles's judgment that there was lack both of science in the singing and of sweetness in the voice.

Altogether the evening had been a great success; every one was delighted with every one else, and the supper was not the least charming part, preceded as it was by Lance's bringing the little seven years old choir boy, half asleep, ready to cry and quite worn out, and putting him under Wilmet's care. He had half his night's rest out on the sofa before he was picked up in the kindly arms of the big bass and carried off to the mail train. Lance seemed much disposed to go with them by mistake; indeed, he was only withheld from accompanying them to the station by Felix reminding him rather sharply that someone must be kept sitting up for him.

It was over, and the morning began with Felix standing straight up in the office, master now rather than brother, and gravely saying, 'Now, Lance, that this excitement is at an end, I shall expect attention and punctuality, and shall excuse no more neglects. Take this invoice, and overlook the unpacking of those goods.'

'Yes, sir.' Lance wriggled his shoulders, feeling intensely

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weary of such tasks; and as he stood, paper in hand, still he partly whistled, partly hummed the Hungarian air, till the foreman came out of the printing-house, saying, 'Mr. Lancelot, I should be much obliged if you would desist. It distracts the young men.'

Of course Lance bothered the young men, but desisted whenever he recollected it, and then inly bemoaned the having passed a light-house of anticipation, and having before him only a dreary irksome twilight waste.

Edgar had not been seen that morning, except to leave word that he meant to breakfast with his friends at the Fortinbras Arms; but at the dinner hour he looked into the office, and saying, 'You are at liberty, Lance, I want you,' carried him off, Felix knew not why nor where, and had no time to ask, even when Lance came back, and this was not till past two, with the shop overflowing, and customers waiting to be attended to. It was one of those times when gossipry was rife, and the master had to stand talking, talking, while his assistants had more than enough on their hands with the real purchasers, a division of labour that usually came naturally, but to which Lance was evidently not conforming himself as usual; and at last Felix heard him absolutely denying that certain blotting-blocks ever had been, would, or could be made, and had to turn hastily to the rescue and undertake that they should be forthcoming by the next week. Also two orders proved to have been left not entered, and therefore not attended to, and Felix was thoroughly roused into vexation and anger. As soon as the last hurried customers had come and gone, while Stubbs and Lightfoot were closing the shutters, he again summoned Lance with, 'This will not do, Lance. Your ignorance and laziness are not to be the limit of people's wants, and I will not have my customers neglected. I have had patience with you all through this business, and that good fellow Lamb has shewn forbearance that amazes me, but it must go on no longer. Things cannot be done by halves. Either you must turn over a new leaf, and give your mind to the business, or you must give it up, and look out for some other employment.'

'You wish me to give it up?' mumbled Lance, in a voice that sounded sullen.

'You are going the way to make me do so.'

'You don't want me? Very well.'

'Stay, Lance,' said Felix, whose reproofs had never before been received by Lance in this manner, 'I wish you to understand. You offered your services under a generous impulse last year, when I was overdone and perplexed; but I doubted then if it were not a mistake. You had come to be very valuable, more so than any mere hireling could be, and I am very thankful to you; but if you are to be like what you have been for a month past, you are doing some harm to the business and a great deal to yourself, and you had better choose some line that you can be hearty in.'

'Could you afford it, Felix?'

'I must afford it! Such work as yours has been of late is the most expensive of all. Eh!' rather startled; 'have you anything in your head?'

'I hardly know.'

A message came in at the moment, and by the time Felix had answered it, Lance had vanished, rather to his vexation and uneasiness. He went up to supper, the first family meeting where there had been time to talk over the humours of the day before. Edgar was full of fun; and the report Cherry had been writing for the 'Pursuivant' was read aloud in the family conclave, and freely canvassed, but Lance, though he put in a word or two here and there, was much quieter than usual; and when all the others moved back into the drawing-room, he touched Robina's arm, and kept her with him in the dark room.

'What should you say, Bob, if I got out of it all?' was his first word.

'Out of it all!'

'Ay. Felix thinks me no loss, and I've got a chance.'

'Oh!' a long interrogative not well pleased sound it was, not answered at once; and Robina added, 'Does Mr. Miles want an assistant?'

''Tisn't that sort. You saw the gentleman that came down with Edgar and the Hugarians?'

'Yes, his name is Allen, he is manager of the National Minstrelsy,' Edgar said.

'Just so. He has got a lease of a concert-room in town, and

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he would give me five pounds a week to sing two nights a week through the season!'

'Lance!' Robina could only stand breathless.

'I'll tell you all about it. You know Edgar came and called me just at dinner-time.'

'I know, and Felix got no dinner at all except a sandwich that Wilmet sent down.'

'Well, that was his own fault. However, there they were at the Fortinbras Arms, in the best blue room, just come down to breakfast.'

'Who? The Hungarians?'

'Yes. Mr. Allen and M. Prebel were waiting for the lady, to ring and have the hot things up. What a stunner she is, to be sure! the finest woman I ever saw in my life, and such pretty ways when she can't find an English word, I should think a queen must be just like her.'

'Yes, if she is waited for in that way. Did you get anything to eat, then, Lance?'

'Didn't we, though? Why, they had asked us to breakfast; and such a breakfast I never set eyes on—devilled kidneys, and pie with truffles in it, and pine-apple jam—and wine! They asked for wines that Reid the waiter had never heard of—nor, it is my belief, Mr. Jones either.'

'But is this all to come out of their expenses that are paid for them?'

'You're getting like W. W., I declare, Bobbie. I never thought of that; but I'll go up to Reid, and find out the worth of my own share, and wipe that out. Well, they were uncommonly kind and civil. Edgar's quite at home with them, you know; talks French like a house on fire, or German—I don't know which it was, but she made it sound as pretty as could be, and I should soon pick it up. I had no notion what they were at, but Edgar said she wanted to hear me sing that song of Sullivan's again, and I could not help doing it; and then she smiled and bowed and thanked, and Mr. Allen made remarks, about my wanting lightness and style, said it came of singing too much cathedral music.'

'O Lance, wasn't that like the Little Master saying Montjoie St. Denis?'

'Nonsense! He's no more like the Little Master than you are; Edgar says he's as respectable as Old Time, and has got a little mouse of a wife as good as gold. But he does want a high tenor to sing his English ballads, and he'll give me this, with chances to sing at private concerts, and opportunities of getting lessons on the violin. Think of that, you solemn bird, you.'

'Where would you live?'

'With Edgar. Then I could make up the difference to Fee; and what I could save, with Edgar's picture, will take us to Italy. And there I could get finished up first-rate.'

'You've not settled it so?'

'Why, no. The first thing that struck me was that it was awfully cool by Felix, to say all this without notice to him, and I told them as much; but then they said they didn't want to inconvenience Felix, and wouldn't want me till March.'

'Just as if you were his servant.'

'In that light, so I am.'

'You don't really think of doing it, Lance?'

'I don't mean one thing or the other yet, Robin! Here's Felix one side telling us that he's very much obliged to me, but I am worse than no use at all; and Edgar and this Allen on the other, saying that here's the line that I am cut out for.'

'But Felix can only mean when you are gone mad after the concert.'

'And who is to help getting mad, when their life is all dulness and botheration? Edgar told me it would be so—and now Felix himself declares it was a mistake my ever working here.'

'Felix must have been terribly displeased, to say so.'

'I believe he was indeed! but I couldn't help it. How can one mind foolscap and satin wove, and all the rest of it, when there are such glorious things beyond?'

'O Lance, I never heard you say "couldn't help it" before!'

'Now, Robin, say in three words. Do you want me to be a mere counter-jumper all my life?'

'O Lance—don't.'

'There, you see what you really feel about it. Now—without coming to such a point as Sims Reeves, or Joachim, or—' (and Lance's face was full of infinite possibility), 'I could with the most

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ordinary luck get up high enough to have a handsome maintenance; and at any rate, I should live with what is life to me—have time to study the science—be a composer, maybe—and get into a society that is not all inferior. I hate the isolation we live in here—not a real lady out of one's own family to be friendly with one.'

'But I don't think ladies are so with musical people.'

'Maybe not, but they are a strong, cultivated, refined society of their own, able to take care of themselves. What now, Robin, can't you speak? What is it now?'

'I was only thinking of what you said last time Edgar asked you.'

'I hadn't seen London then, I knew nothing about it. The very Sundays there are different things from what they are in this deadly lively place.'

'That's as you make them. Besides, that makes no difference as to that other thing you said.'

'What?' (A little crossly.)

'About the cathedral and the stage,' whispered Robina, hanging her head.

'One doesn't want all that one ever said when one was a high-flown ass to be thrown in one's teeth,' said Lance, angrily.

'Oh!' but otherwise Robina held her tongue.

Presently Lance began again persuasively. 'You see this is only training, after all, Bobbie; I may take to sacred music, oratorios or anything else, when once I have got thoroughly taught; and I can only do that by living on my own voice. I must lay by enough to take me to Italy, and when I have learnt there, then I can turn to anything.'

'Do you think you ever would lay by?'

That was rather a cutting question, for Lance, though never in debt, never could keep a sixpence in his pocket.

'I could if I had a real object.'

'Only I don't think it would wholly depend on yourself,' said sensible Robina. 'I suppose they don't pay by the week; and then if the concern should not answer?'

'That's sheer impossibility. There isn't a safer man in London than Allen. It is a much more profitable investment than old Pur.'

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'Then if you lived with Edgar, you don't know how much you might have to go shares for."

Thereupon Lance broke out into absolute anger against Robina for her unkindness to Edgar, talking much of the want of charity of people who lived at home, and thought everything beyond their ken must be wicked. She ventured to ask what Felix thought of it, and was told in return that Felix was not only not his father, but though the best fellow in the world, had no more knowledge of it than a child in petticoats. It was for the good of Felix, and everyone else, that they should not all hang about at home in the stodge and mire.

How long this might have gone on there is no saying, but Felix's voice was heard calling to them in preparation for evening prayers. When Robina heard Lance's voice rise in all its sweetness in the Evening Hymn, her heart was so full of yearning pain and disappointment, that she could hardly hold back her tears till she could kneel and hide her face in her hands.

She had this comfort. She did not understand from Lance that he had accepted, and he certainly did not join Edgar that night in the kitchen, but, saying he was tired out, he went at once to bed.

On Saturday she had not one private moment with him, but on the other hand, neither she hoped had Edgar; for the work both of the press and of the shop happened to be unusually heavy, and neither he nor Felix had a moment to spare; and Edgar spent the evening with some friends in the town.

Sunday afternoon, the family hour for walks and talks, poured with rain, and thereby was favourable to letters to Fulbert. Indeed, Angela's commencement of some sacred music was stopped, by the general voice entreating her to wait till the letters were finished. Lance, who never wrote to anybody but Fulbert, had resumed the practice ever since he had received an affectionate letter called forth by his illness, and was now busy with his, little blotty portfolio; while Robina, having no Sunday correspondent, was half reading, half watching Stella explaining pictures to Theodore.

Presently Lance stretched across, and silently put a sheet of note-paper into her lap, hushing her by a sign. It had been

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begun in his best hand, and it must be confessed that that hand was at present a scratchy one, and there were various erasures.

DEAR SIR,

I have done my best to consider your kind and flattering proposal, and have come to the conclusion that for the present it will be better for me to continue where I am. There will thus be no need to apply to my eldest brother.

With my respectful thanks,
Yours faithfully,
LANCELOT O. UNDERWOOD.

Robina made a little pantomine of clapping her hands, for which Lance did not appear to thank her, but still in dumb show required her judgment on the choice of several words. She mutely marked her preference, and he returned to his place and copied it. Still he had not addressed the letter. He put it into his pocket, with a significant smile at his sister. Evening came, late service, supper; still it was in his pocket till the moment of bed-time, and then it was that Robina saw him linger with Edgar, and went to her room with a heart full of trembling prayer.

'Edgar,' as his brother arrived in the kitchen, and prepared his pipe, 'how shall I address this?'

'Eh! you needn't be in too great a haste. We had better break it to poor old Blunderbore first.'

'There's no breaking in the case. I'm not going.'

'Ah! I knew how it would be when you began running about to all the womankind in the house.'

'I've not spoken to a soul but Bobbie,' said Lance rather hotly, as Edgar laughed.

'Then one was enough to do your business?'

'I only spoke to her to clear my own mind.'

'Ay, to get someone to contemplate Hercules between Vice and Virtue; but it won't do, my boy. Little Allen is as virtuous as Felix himself, and the choice is simply between the thing you can do and the thing you can't.'

'I can do my duty here,' said Lance bluntly.

'You've tried, my boy; you made a gallant effort, and I let you alone while you had a head to be spared, but 'tis no good trying to force the course of the stream, and you had better break

loose, before you get too old for the real thing that you are made for.'

'No, Edgar, I've thought it over, and found out how things stand. Here will Felix begin now to have more on his hands, and can manage to shell out less than ever while he had Froggy to fall back on. Now, not only is my nominal salary much less than he could offer a stranger, but half of it goes back into the house-keeping, while I'm *done for* at home, and I don't see how he could meet the difference just now.'

'Whew! that's the blind way you all go on, putting the present before the future. If Felix had a grain of spirit, he would revolt at preying on your flesh and blood. Flesh and blood—why, its genius and spirit crushed up in this hole!'

'It is no more than all of us have done by him, ever since he was of my size.'

'But it is so short-sighted, Lance. You could make it up to him so soon. Five pounds for certain the week—and possibilities, remember. You'll lodge with me—that's nothing; and for the rest, you'll soon live as we do—like the birds of the air.'

'I couldn't make it up to him, and save for Italy; besides I should be earning nothing there.'

'But I should! Copying is a certain trade. Come now, Lance, you've taken some panic. Tell me what is at the bottom of it! Have they been warning you against us wicked Bohemians?'

'They? Nonsense!'

'*She*, then?'

'It is nothing at all that Robina said.'

'Come, make a clean breast. What lies at the bottom of this absurd rejection of the best offer you'll ever have in your life?'

Edgar took the pipe out of his mouth, that the smoke might not obscure his view of the young face whose brow was resting on an arm leant on the mantel-piece, and the eyes far away. 'What's the bugbear? and I'll clear it up.'

'No bugbear.'

'You don't trust me. Eh? Is that it? Have they told you I mean to prey on your innocence?'

'No, indeed, Edgar!'

'Are you afraid of the great and wicked world? I thought

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you'd more spirit than that; and I've always told you, you might run after as many churches as you chose. I'd never hinder you. Come, have it out, Lance, you think me a corrupter of your artless youth?'

'No!'

'Come, out with it. What has turned you?'

The answer came at last in his low clear voice, speaking more into the fire than to Edgar, the eyes still fixed and far away—'"And here we offer and present unto Thee ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice."'

'What do you mean? what's that?' said Edgar, half startled, half angry.

'It comes after the Holy Communion,' said Lance, quite as much shocked by the novelty with which the familiar sound struck on his brother's ears.

'Oh! a pious utterance that only a *tête exaltée* takes literally.'

'I should not join in it if I didn't mean it,' muttered Lance, in the most brief matter-of-fact way.

'Then why aren't you living barefoot on bread and water in a hermitage?'

'Because that's not my duty. It would not be reasonable.'

'There's great force in that word,' began Edgar, with a little scoff in his tone, but altering it into one of more earnestness. 'Now, Lance, I want to understand your point of view. How does that formula hinder you?'

'Because,' said Lance, much against his will, 'it wouldn't be making my soul and body a reasonable sacrifice, to turn the training I had for God's praise into singing love songs to get money and fame.'

'Why do you assume that beauty and delight of any sort is not just as pleasing to God as your chants and anthems?'

'No. One is offered to Him, the other is mere entertainment.'

'So is the first to most folks. Now, you boy, honestly, do you mean that it is not much of a muchness with sacred and profane, so far as motive goes?'

'It is what I am always trying that it should be,' said Lance.

'Only trying?'

'Only trying.'

'And you consider yourself to be this sacrifice, this victim, by singing in a surplice for ladies to whisper about, instead of getting trained to interpret—nay, what I do say! maybe, compose—the grandest human music. You've got it in you, my boy.'

'You may say what you please,' said Lance, turning away to the fire.

'I don't want to vex you, boy, I only want to make it out. I see the *sacrifice*.'

'It was my own fault for saying a word about it to you,' muttered Lance.

'But I don't see the sense of it,' proceeded Edgar, 'or what it is but your own fancy that puts the one thing up in the heights, the other down in the depths,'

'You must know that,' said Lance, 'the fever and transport that comes of one kind of music has nothing good in it.'

'That's the question.'

'I know it has not for me.'

'And has the other?'

'Of course it has! Besides, I don't do it for myself. Come, Edgar, tell me how to direct that letter, and let me go.'

'You may leave it till I go to town.'

'That would not be fair. He will want to look out for someone else. Tell me!'

'Not I! I'm not going to let you make a fool of yourself in a fit of religious excitement.'

Lance smiled. 'Much excitement in a cold dark church in a wet morning, with not twenty people there.'

'That's as you work yourself up. Here, sit down and take the other pipe.'

'I can't; I can hardly stand yours, my head is raging!'

'Oh! that accounts for it! Go off to bed, and wake in week-day senses.'

'I wish you'd let me have done with it,' sighed Lance; but Edgar shook his head with, 'All for your good, my dear fellow!'

'If Balak's messengers *will* stay the night, it is not my doing,' said Lance to himself, as he wearily mounted the stairs to his sleepless bed in the barrack; for though his headaches had become

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much less frequent and disabling, still his constitution was so sensitive, that a course of disturbed nights always followed any excitement; and thus the morrow found him dull and confused enough to render his attempts at diligence so far from successful, that he was more than once sharply called to order; and Felix came in at dinner-time, exclaiming, 'I can't think what's the matter with that boy. He seems as if he would never do any good again!'

'*Précisément!*' muttered Edgar. 'You had better give him up with a good grace, as I told you before.'

And being at the moment alone in the room with Felix and Geraldine, he not only detailed his plans for Lance, but eagerly counselled Felix to invest at least half Thomas Underwood's legacy in the National Minstrelsy.

'Really!' said Felix, in a tone of irony, 'this is nearly coming to the old plan of setting up a family circus! Then it is this that has so entirely unsettled him?'

'That the old must pass away is not sufficiently appreciated here.'

Then Edgar appealed to Cherry for the charms of artist society, and the confutation of the delusions respecting it held by Philistines at home, a conversation only interrupted by the arrival of dinner, and the rest of the population.

Felix as usual had to go down after a few mouthfuls; Edgar followed him to say on the stairs, 'I've one piece of advice to give. Remember that you are an old Philistine giant, and act with due humility.'

'Is he set upon it?'

'I cannot say heart and soul, for heart and what he thinks soul are pulling opposite ways. I say, Felix, you should take into consideration the effect on me. I haven't sat still to listen to so much piety since my father's time; it is a caution to see a little chap so simply literal.'

Felix could wait no longer. He found Lance alone in the office, resting his head on his desk. 'You'll be in time for dinner, Lance!'

'Thank you, I'd rather not. Send Stubbs home.'

'Head-ache?'

'Not much now!'

'I'm sorry I was sharp with you this morning, Lance. You should have told me!'

'It was not worth while, but I did mean to have done better to-day, Felix!'

'I believe you did. If you think it will set you to rights, I would let you off this afternoon.'

'No, thank you; it is getting better.'

Felix looked at him a moment or two, then said, 'Edgar tells me he has been talking to you.'

'Yes. I hope you have given him a settler, Felix.'

'Have you?'

'I tried, but he would not take it. He thought it was only Sunday.'

'Only Sunday!'

'That made me sure it would not do.'

'You are quite right, Lance. So far as it depends on me, I should have done all in my power to keep you from what cannot but be a life of much temptation, and I am thankful that you have decided it for yourself. You are really content to stay here with me?'

'Content—well, not just now; but I shall be again when all the remains of the bear-fight have subsided,' said Lance. 'I ought and I must, and that's enough.'

With which words he ran out as some one was heard entering the shop; and Felix stood for a few moments over the fire, musing on the brave way in which his young brother had met the enticement, and on the danger into which his own reproofs, however well-merited, had driven him.

Lance's other occupation that evening did not make him better pleased with Edgar's friends. Wilmet had decreed—and he had submitted half ruefully, half-merrily—that what remained of his salary after his contribution to the house expenses, should be guarded by her for his wardrobe, only half-a-crown a week being put into his own hands; and as this always managed to disappear without much to shew for it, she viewed it as quite enough for waste; and indeed, out of what was in her keeping she had managed to provide him with a watch.

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With his Monday half-crown, and sixpence besides, he repaired to the Fortinbras Arms to pay for his share of the notable breakfast; but he found some demur; Mr. Jones was aghast at his own bill, and really unwilling to send it in. The private supper, the next day's breakfast, and all that the party had called for, amounted to what would make a terrible hole in the receipts of the concert.

As to Lance's paying the fifth part of the *déjeuner*, the landlord thought it was impossible, and though his three shillings might perhaps represent the cost of what he had individually consumed, to offer or accept that was not according to rules. Mr. Jones would gladly have made this bill his subscription to the organ, if he could but have afforded the loss; but this, as he told Lance, he could not do. He listened, however, with a smile of some pity, when Lance assured him that his own and his brother's shares should be made up; and Lance picked out the charge, and carried it off to Edgar.

There again he met with no success. Edgar laughed at him, and told him he did not know the privileges of the artiste; and when Lance waxed hot, and declared that if the concert paid the expenses of the two stars themselves, it was a wicked exaction to make it defray the expenses of either Mr. Allen or their guests, he was answered coolly that expensive articles must be taken on their own terms, and that spoiling the Philistines was always fair.

'Then don't you mean to pay, Edgar?'

Edgar gave his foreign shrug, and made a gesture of incapability. He was vexed with Lance, and at no pains to soften matters.

'Now,' said Lance, with a sort of grave simplicity, 'I understand what living like birds of the air means.'

Lance went back to Mr. Jones, and told him that the two-fifths of the breakfast should be paid. And in twelve weeks it was done. But by this specimen it may be guessed that the new organ was not exactly purchased by the concert.

CHAPTER XXIX.

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BRYNHILD.

'Oft with anxious straining eyes
We watch the coming of some joy long hoped for;
And now 'tis near. But at its side a dark
And stealthy thing, that we should fly like death
Did we but see it, is advancing on us,
Yes, step by step with those of its bright compeer.'
King Henry II., a Drama.
(*Quoted in Helps' Casimir Maremma.*)

'WHICH is to have the precedence, Alda's child or ours?'

'Alda's child is not likely to be ready for inspection as early as ours.'

'Oh! I thought you would vote it treason to babydom not to begin with Lowndes Square.'

'My maternal feelings draw me the other way, you see.'

'You won't confess it to Wilmet!'

'It is of no use to go to Alda before twelve,' put in Marilda. 'Cherry had better go to the Royal Academy before it gets full.'

It was May, and the catalogue of the Royal Academy bore—

No. 260.—Brynhild. . . . . T. E. Underwood.

and a good way further on, among the water-colours,

No. 601.—Four studies, { The Lesson / Hearing a Story / With the Kitten / Listening to Music } Geraldine Underwood.

No. 615.—The Faithful Acolyte . . . Geraldine Underwood.

'But abruptly turning,
Hied he to the choir,
Touched the Altar tapers
With a flake of fire.'
(*The Three Crowns.*)

So, these having been accepted, Geraldine had come up to town to see them in their place. The undertaking was far less formidable than it had been a year ago, for Cherry was now much more at home with her cousins.

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She understood Marilda better now, and reproached herself for having taken for worldliness what was really acquiescence rather than cause any disturbance in the family such as could worry her father, of whose state she had been aware all that last summer. Cherry respected her now, though they had little in common. Marilda had become too much acclimatized to London to like country life. She made some awkward attempts at squiress duty, but was far more in her element in her office, where she took on herself to attend to business so vigorously, that no one would have known there had been any change but by the initials. Felix had been of much use to her, and had certainly gained a good deal in consideration by the manifest reliance placed on him; and his position among the citizens of Bexley was now a fixed and settled thing.

Mrs. Underwood, in the inertness of grief, did not move from Centry until she was carried up to town by her strong desire to preside at Lady Vanderkist's confinement. She was, however, disappointed, for Lady Mary undertook the care of her daughter-in-law; but she made up for it as well as she could by permitting all the assiduities from the good lady that Alda would endure, and being herself extremely friendly and good-natured.

The first proposal had been that Cherry should go up with them and see the pictures on the private day, but the east wind and flying threats of rheumatism had prevented this, till Marilda, running down to inspect her works at Centry, carried her off, undertaking, with better knowledge than before, that she should be well cared for.

So here was the carriage at the door, and Edgar come to escort her to the realization of the almost incredible fact that she, as well as himself, was an artist and exhibitor. She had heard favourable opinions, but none the less did her heart palpitate with far more of distress than of exultation as at a strange presumptuous unnatural position—she, who, while striving to be satisfied with faithfully doing her best, had so much wished for success as to make it a continual prayer, that the works of their hands might be prospered upon both, and to feel it an effort honestly to add the clause, 'If it be thy will—if Thou see it good for us.'

She had not seen Edgar's picture, nor himself since the concert, and there had been some breaths of rumour which took form in

the saying that the absence of the family from Kensington Palace Gardens had been a sad thing for him.

However that might be, he was as much at his 'Chérie's' service as ever, though with something of the forced manner she had known in him at moments of crisis, and which betrayed much anxiety. He repeated to her many times on the way that Brynhild had been unfairly dealt with in the hanging, and related anecdotes of injustice suffered by whoever did not belong to favoured cliques, all which made her uneasy. Of hers he said little. She knew that water-colours at the Royal Academy exhibition received little notice, but had obediently followed some crotchet of Mr. Renville's which had taken her thither. Trafalgar Square was then still the locality, and when the steps had been surmounted, and they stood between the two doors leading to the water-colours, it was straight on that they went, for the sight of Brynhild was the triumph and delight that Geraldine had figured to herself for months past.

It was, as she already knew, in the second room, rather below the privileged line; and at this early hour, the numbers of visitors were so scanty that she could see the cocoon shaped glow of yellow flame across the room.

'Oh! there she is! She is smaller than I thought.'

'Just what Polly said. All ladies go in for 'igh hart on the Zam zummin scale.'

She must have hurt his feelings, she saw, or he would not have compared her criticism with Marilda's; and as she felt that he was watching her countenance as he led her forward and lodged her opposite. From eager expectation her look became constrained, as it shot through her that this was not the Brynhild of the sketch and of her imagination. She was disappointed!

'Well, what?' asked Edgar impatiently, reading the countenance in spite of all endeavours.

'How like Marilda!'

'What, Brynhild, the toad! So she would be. I suppose the caricature demoralized me, and the family features are the same.'

'And Sigurd is Ferdinand.'

'Nature created him for a model.'

It was not the likeness to Marilda which gave Cherry the sense

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of unfulfilled expectation and dissatisfaction. The lofty expression, the deep awe, the weird cloud-land grandeur that she had connected either with the sketch or her memory of it, had passed away from the finished oil-painting; and when she had called it small, it was not because it was cabinet sized, but because it was wanting in the sense of majesty that can be conveyed in a gem as well as in a colossus. What was to have been a wild scene of terror in the world of mists *would* look extravagant, and neither the pose of Brynhild's limbs nor the position of Sigurd's sword, approved themselves to her eye as correct drawing.

Brother and sister were both far too acute, and too well used to read each other's looks and tones, for fencing or disguise to be possible.

'You don't like it.'

'O Edgar!' much distressed, 'indeed there is a great deal very beautiful, but somehow I had imagined it different.'

'Oh, if you came with a preconceived notion.'

'Perhaps that's it,' said Cherry, peeping through her eye-lashes, as long ago at the great Achilles, and making them a sieve to divest the image before her of all that her eye would condemn in spite of herself.

'I see a great deal of beauty, but somehow I thought the whole would have been more finished,' she said.

'Not possible. A rude half developed myth is not in keeping with the precision of a miniature. Besides, the finish of Sigurd's armour throws back the vague beyond.

Her feeling had been that the Pre-Raffaelitism of the hauberk was too like worsted stockings, and not in keeping with the Turneresque whirl of flame and smoke around the sleeping Valkyr; but the disloyalty of not admiring Edgar's picture was impossible to her loving spirit; she listened and looked through her eye-lashes, till though Brynhild's limbs were to her unassisted sense almost as uncomfortable as those of Achilles had been, he imparted a glamour, so that she thought she beheld it as it ought to have been, and believed it to be so great and deep a work of art that study alone could appreciate it.

'Yes, I see—I see it now—I could not before—but that is all the better!'

The room was filling and they were jostled by a group diligently working their way with their catalogue from No. 1 to No. 1200.

'What's that glaring red and yellow thing?'

'260, Brynhild. Who was she, Flo?'

'Don't you know, Mamma? That French queen who was torn to pieces by wild horses.'

'I don't see any horses. She is all on fire.'

'I suppose she was burnt afterwards. And that's the king who did it.'

'What a horrid picture!'

'There's the intelligent public one works for,' said Edgar. 'Come and try your luck.'

He paused, however, to show her the difference a foot's elevation would have made to his painting; and she, with a mind more at leisure from itself, waited not only to sympathize but to be fascinated with the loveliness or power of more than one picture past which he would have hurried her, with murmurs at the R.A. who had secured the best situation.

Here they were in the water-colour room, obliged to wait, to penetrate the throng round the lesser ones, which were so close together that there was no distinct appropriation of the remarks.

'What a dear little thing!' 'Is it all the same child?' 'It more people than any can't be portrait, she is so pretty.'

Edgar smiled at her, and she whispered, with great inconsistency, 'No, it can't be that. Besides, childish prettiness always pleases more people than anything high and ideal.'

She tried to turn to the Acolyte, and two or three gentlemen yielded place to the lame girl. 'Geraldine Underwood,' said one, making her start, till she saw he was reading from his catalogue. 'I don't remember her name before.'

'No, and there's so much power as well as good drawing and expression, that I should not have thought it a woman's work.'

This, the most ambitioned praise a woman can receive, made her indeed Cherry-red, and Edgar's beaming glance of congratulation was most delightful.

Certainly, whatever his faults, among them was neither jealousy nor want of affectionateness; and Cherry's success gave him unqualified pleasure, both agreeing in the belief that she was

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on a level with the public taste, while he soared too high beyond it.

Her paintings had a strength of colouring unusual in inexperienced artists, perhaps owing to the depth of hue she had grown accustomed to when painting for her old woman, and thus they asserted themselves, and were not killed by their neighbours, but rather, as Edgar said, committed slaughter all round.

Yet 'The Acolyte' was on the whole a dark picture: the Church was in a brown dim shade, within which, however, its perspective vaultings, arches, and tracery, were perfectly drawn, knowing where they were going and what they meant, yet not obtruded; and the Altar hangings, richly patterned in olive green and brown gold, were kept back in spite of all their detail, throwing out the 'flake of fire' and the glitter reflected on the gold ornaments, which had been drawn with due deference to Clement's minute information, while in the fragment of the east window just seen above, glittered a few jewels of stained glass touched by the rising sun, and to which the subdued colouring of the rest gave wonderful glory; and the server himself was so tinted with gray that even his white dress did not glare, while his face was the face of Lance, as it had been a few years back, boyish and mirthful through all its dutiful reverence. Of course it was not new to Edgar, but he owned that he was always struck by it whenever he came that way; and Cherry heaved a little sigh of parental pride and delight as she owned that her little 'server' did look better than she had expected.

Then Edgar elbowed her to what was called at home her 'Constellation,' where she had caught Stella's sweet little head four times over—in the seriousness of lesson-learning, with eager parted smiling lips with which she listened to a story, with her tender caressing expression towards the kitten she was nursing, and with the rapt dreamy gaze that her brother's music would bring over her countenance. All had the merit of being caught—in the first sketch—entirely without consciousness on Stella's part; and though she had been nailed to the positions afterwards, it had been possible to preserve the unstudied expression that was one great charm of the drawings, much more sketchy and suggestive than was their companion.

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It was not easy to maintain a stand before the frame that held the four, for people must have told one another of it, and squeezed their way to it; till the poor little artist, growing nervous at the press, was grasping her brother tight to make him take her away. Just then there was a kind eager greeting, 'Good morning; I am delighted to meet you here. You must allow me to congratulate you.'

It was Mr. Grinstead, too considerate to utter a name that would instantly have brought all eyes upon the little lame girl, whom the gazers were almost sweeping away. He was full of that gracious fatherly kindness that elderly men were prone to show her, and solicitously asked where she was staying, and whether he might call upon her; and then, taking advantage of an interval of people, he brought her again in front of her pictures. With him on Lord Gerald's side of her, and Edgar on the other, she felt safe enough to enter into his kind critique, so discriminating as to gratify, improve, and stimulate, her far more than if it had been all compliment. By the time this was over, Cherry could stand no longer, and it was time for her visit to her sister, so the sculptor did Ferdinand's old part by taking care of her while Edgar hunted up their cousin's brougham.

'O Edgar, aren't you coming?'

'Well! I can't say the Mynheer's *ménage* likes me better than I like it.'

'Oh, Eddie, dear, *do*. How shall I ever get in among all those dreadful strange servants?'

'What, the crack exhibitor, whose pictures transcend woman's genius, afraid of a flunky or two!'

Nevertheless, he let her pull him into the carriage, laughing, and demanding whether she could not have opposed coachman and footman to their congeners; but he recollected the stair-case, and was all the more amenable that in her he had the only perfectly willing auditor of all his whys and wherefores of all Brynhild's characteristics, all his hopes of purchasers and plans built upon her, and (now that Brynhild was out of sight) the most profound believer in her beauties and sublimities.

The arrival was impressive. The vista of liveries, flowers, and marble, was so alarming, that Cherry could hardly have found

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courage to make her way through them with no support but Lord Gerald's; but when she entered the drawing-room the grandeur was instantly mitigated by the plainly attired, gentle, motherly lady who came forward to greet her with a kiss. 'So you are Geraldine, the only sister I have never seen. Alda will be delighted.'

Lady Mary Murray must have been rather surprised by the sight of 'the little deformed one,' with her sweet pensive face of sunshine and shade, and the small slender form, as shapely as that of her sister, though leaning a little forward when walking. So kind was she, that Cherry felt that she could quite spare Edgar when he made his retreat, and never observed that he was not pressed to stay to see Alda, who had a dress-maker with her, and would send down when ready.

This gave Cherry time to become at home with Lady Mary, and to receive some gratifying compliments upon her Constellation, united with a little caution on the danger of making the little girl vain. 'I hope not,' said Cherry much in earnest; 'indeed, I think Edgar and I are mere terrors to all our pretty ones, we teaze them so with sitting.'

'The little boy in a surplice is another brother, I think I heard.'

'Yes, my brother Lance. He is gone into the business now. He was in the Cathedral choir at Minsterham.'

'Oh! I understood that it was a portrait of the one who was in the St. Matthew's brotherhood, in his ornaments.'

'Oh no. That was Clement; and I am sure neither of them wore anything like that! I made out the ornaments from a book.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Lady Mary, a little less cordially; and when Cherry, recollecting her views, proceeded to lead away by speaking of Brynhild, it was to be met with a kind smile and avowal that Mr. Underwood's picture was not so easy to understand.

Then came the summons to Lady Vanderkist's room. It seemed chiefly addressed to her mother-in-law, who, however, extended it to Cherry, and proffered a soft, comfortable, substantial arm to help her up the stairs.

There sat Alda, beautiful to behold in white and bright blue

ribbons, thinner than formerly, but exquisitely and delicately pretty, and so eager in her conference with her milliner, that she could only give Geraldine a hasty kiss, and sign her to a seat, before appealing to Lady Mary on some point of clashing taste respecting her court dress, which was the present subject of engrossing interest to the younger lady, while the elder evidently did not feel greatly at home or interested in a subject which she said had not come before her since the maiden days of Queen Victoria. Indeed, when Alda became excited in maintaining her own opinion, she put an end to it with gentle but irresistible authority, dismissed the milliner, and insisted upon the repose that Alda was inclined to laugh to scorn.

After an exhibition of the little four weeks daughter, a pretty creature, in whom mother as well as grandmother shewed plenty of pride, the two sisters were left to a *tête à tête*, Cherry feeling almost hypocritical when Lady Mary supposed them to be so eager for it.

Rather languidly Alda inquired after everyone at home, chiefly after Wilmet and Captain Harewood, where he was, and what chance there was of his return. Then Cherry talked of the great home subject of interest, namely that the organ was actually ordered; but Lady Vanderkist attended little, and it was safer as well as more entertaining to let her talk of herself; and she seemed to have had a very gay winter, to have been recognized as the great lady of her neighbourhood as well as bride and beauty, and to have had much sporting society at home and abroad, while now she looked forward to a season among the circles which had always been the object of her ambition. No wonder that the cares and joys of Bexley occupied her but little, and that it was not much to her whether Felix was to be a town-councillor. However, she was now among people who considered it an honour to have a sister exhibiting at the Academy, and she professed much eagerness to see the Constellation. 'But what could have induced Edgar to send such a picture?' she added; 'Adrian says it is the maddest thing he ever saw in his life.'

'It takes some study,' said Cherry, subduing her indignation.

'I should think it had taken very little study.'

'You have not seen it?'

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'No of course not yet. I shall go as soon as I can, it is so stupid not to be able to talk of the Exhibition; but I don't look forward to Edgar's picture at all, I hear the drawing and painting are so disgraceful.'

'There is an apparent carelessness that enhances effect.'

'Standing up for Edgar as usual, Cherry! But if you still have any influence with him, this is the time to use it. Adrian hears that he has taken up with a lot of tremendous scamps. Indeed, he saw him on the Derby day betting away with all his might. Now he cannot stand that long, and Adrian says I must let him know that when he gets into difficulties, he need not expect to fall back upon us.'

'The last thing he is likely to do,' said Cherry, burning with suppressed wrath.

'Well, give him a warning, and tell him to be careful how he comes in Adrian's way. It upsets me so when he comes in and asks where I think he has met my precious brother.'

'I don't see,' cried Geraldine, breaking out, 'why a place should be worse for one than for the other.'

Alda drew up her head with a little contempt, but instead of flying out as when they were on an equality, she merely said, 'Don't you?'

Then Geraldine recollected herself, and tried to say meekly something about the difference made by being able to afford it; but though Alda was kinder than usual, and changed the subject, there was no more real comfort throughout the visit, and she went home to be unhappy. Here it was as hard as ever to behave properly to Alda. Her presence seemed always to rouse the spitfire propensities, of which Cherry would otherwise have been unconscious; and what was far worse was the misgiving that she had only spoken too truly. Cherry's heart sank, scold it as she would for sinking. Her *will* might adore Brynhild, but her sense assured her of grievous carelessness in the execution; and when she recalled Edgar himself, she knew there was something indefinable about him that confirmed Alda's suspicions.

Her own success had been real and brilliant, but through it all her heart ached with apprehension as she became more conscious of the difference with which her doings and his were regarded,

and could not always succeed in attributing everything to personal politeness to herself. She was staying on to take a few more studies, and to collect materials for the illustrations of a serial tale, an order for which Mr. Renville had procured her; and she found herself quite at home at those pleasant little parties at his house, treated as one of the confraternity who had won her standing, and with new comers begging to be introduced. Mr. Grinstead was always there, and a real friend and protector among strangers; and all was delightful except the reserve about Brynhild, and the frequent absence of Edgar, who used once to be always welcome, and like a son of the house.

Even at Lady Vanderkist's, Geraldine found herself a mild sort of lion, when Alda came out into the world and found that her sister was viewed as having done something remarkable.

Not that there was much intercourse. There *was* an invitation to the christening, extended even to Edgar and the school girls; but Lady Mary was more the mover in this than Alda herself. Edgar excused himself, and it was not a very brilliant festivity. Indeed, one anxiety on Geraldine's part was lest Lady Mary's engaging kindness should embolden Angela to break out aloud in the wrath and indignation that stiffened her neck and shone in her eyes at the bare dull christening on a week-day—standing all alone —in an ugly 'pewy' church. A luncheon, at which the health of Mary Alda Vanderkist was drunk, was the only honour to the occasion; and Sir Adrian, though not actually uncivil, looked as usual bored, and left the amiable and gracious to his wife and mother.

Mrs. Underwood was indignant, and abused him all the way home. All Lady Mary's kindness had not hidden from her the fact that Alda was ready to spurn aside the scaffolding by which she had mounted to her present elevation, and was only withheld from so doing in consideration of Marilda's wealth; while Marilda, with her unfailing good nature and instinct of defence towards Alda, declared that all arose out of anxiety lest Sir Adrian should be wearied with them, and bluntly declared, 'You know, Mamma, we are very tiresome people; not like Cherry here, who always has something to say.'

'Oh! Cherry is a genius, but without that people needn't be

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tiresome, as you call it, to those that brought them up, and made them what they are.'

'We didn't bring up Sir Adrian, Mamma.'

'I'm not talking of Sir Adrian. One expects nothing from a fine young man about town; but, Alda, that was like my own child to me, never so much as asking us to see her in her court dress!'

'She ought to have done that,' said Cherry, who had been reckoning the quantity of pleasure that could have been so cheaply given.

'Now depend on it, Sir Adrian doesn't like his wife to make a show of herself,' cried Marilda, hitting on a subtly delicate motive rather than have no weapon of defence for this favourite cousin. Certainly there never had been a fuller adoption as sister and brother than hers had been of Alda and Edgar from the moment they had been given to her. She respected and trusted Felix, and was free and kind with Cherry and all the rest; but her affection for these two was quite a different thing, and resolutely blind; and this—just as last year with Wilmet—made her comfortable to Cherry, since she too ignored all that could be against Edgar, and fought his battles fiercely when mother or grandmother picked up reports of his idleness, of the ill success of the National Minstrelsy, in which he was somehow concerned, and of the unsatisfactory habits into which he was falling.

Very dull were the evenings when he did not come, and only worn through by reading aloud. No doubt the house in its quiet widowed condition was far less attractive than of old, and that the lively young man should neglect it, even with his favourite sister there, was more to be regretted than wondered at; but whenever he did come, he was greeted with delight, petted and made much of, as if with the desire to secure that presence, though it was not always as much of a sunbeam as of old.

One afternoon, however, he hurried in in a state of ecstasy. A wealthy manufacturer, noted as a purchaser of modern pictures, was in treaty for Brynhild; and Edgar looked on his fame and fortune as made. Three days ago the taste of the cotton-spinner had been denounced as dependant on fashion and notoriety. Now his discernment had gone up to the skies, and Edgar was wan-

dering about the room in his exultation, talking to Cherry of a winter trip to Rome, and ready to promise everything to everybody. Only the next day, however, came out the principal art journal, containing the long expected mention of Brynhild.

'Alas! No. 260 was disposed of in two lines as 'the flaming production of a tyro in suspense between the Præ-Raffaelite and the Turneresque, who in the meantime had better study the primary rules of drawing.'

Poor Geraldine! She shed a great many bitter tears over the cruel verdict, while Marilda characterised it as wicked, ill-natured, and spiteful; and when Edgar came to them they received him with tenderness and sympathy that would have befitted his sentence in his own proper person.

He was crushed as he had never been before. He did not abuse his critic. Indeed, he had candour enough to tell Cherry that her editorial experience might have taught her the need of shedding a little life-blood now and then for the public to slake their thirst upon, but this very charitableness almost proved it to be his life-blood.

The intended purchaser had not gone so far but that he could draw back, and this breath of hostility had effectually blown him away. He had broken off his treaty and declined Brynhild.

'I don't blame him,' dejectedly said Edgar; 'all the other critics will yelp in suit, and he would be the laughing-stock of his fellow cotton-lords; but he has done for me. The very sight of "Sold" upon my picture would have saved me.'

'Shall you be worse off than before?' asked Marilda,

'Of course one is, for having been led to make engagements under a deception. But there—never mind. Don't vex yourselves about me. I'm the most miserable dog in the world, and that's all about it.'

'Dear Edgar,' said Cherry, smoothing his hand, 'maybe the opposition paper will take up another line.'

'Not a hope, Cherry. That demolished me long ago, only they were all too merciful to show it to you. This was my last chance.'

He lay back in a sort of collapse of complete depression.

Marilda, meanwhile, sat writing at her davenport, and presently

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rising, came towards him with a closed envelope. 'There, Edgar,' she said. 'Now put "Sold" on your picture.'

'Polly, Polly, you're a girl of gold!' cried Edgar, starting to his feet. 'You've made a man of me. I must give you a kiss.'

To Cherry's amazement, a little to her horror, the kiss was given; Marilda only bluntly and gruffly saying, 'There then, only take warning, and don't be a fool again.'

'Your warning comes sweetened, my dear,' said Edgar, 'and it ought to save me. I don't mind confessing that I was in a most awful fix. Well, you have Brynhild, and we'll hang her over the drawing-room door for a scare-crow, only don't let in any Sigurds who won't be as good as you are to art out at elbows!—Good-bye, my Cherry ripe. I must betake me to shaking off the toils of the hunter, now that this good mouse has nibbled them through.'

Cherry had not spirit to rally him on his quiet assumption of the lion's part. And her acceptance of his embrace was not warm. To the delicate sense nurtured under Felix, the whole proceeding was as painful as it was strange; and she was longing to have sold her pictures so as to relieve him herself. True, she had many visions, but she would much have preferred freeing her brother herself to seeing Marilda make a purchase to which she was indifferent, palpably for the sake of assisting him.

Maybe he saw the questioning look in her face, and therefore hurried away so fast that Marilda broke out in regret at having failed to secure him for an intended visit to Sydenham the next day, when part of the day would be spent with friends and the rest in the Crystal Palace. It was the sort of expedition Edgar hated, and Cherry's pride rose enough against the notion of his being purchased to be dragged at Marilda's chariot wheels to prevent her from seconding the proposal to write and ask for his company.

She would have been glad enough of his arm through the long galleries. The heartless glare and plaster shewiness tired her to death; nor were Mrs. Underwood's friends particularly restful.

When she came home late in the evening, she had hardly energy to open a note that lay on the table; but when she had wearily unfolded it, she screamed with amazement and delight. Mr. Renville wrote to tell her of an offer for the Acolyte, and to

propose to her to meet the intending purchaser at his studio on the second day ensuing, at twelve o'clock, to consult about an order for a companion water-colour, the subject likewise taken from the Silver Store, the price of the two together to be £150. Here opened the fulfilment of the longing of her heart, the lightening of Felix's burthen! Her dreams were a strange maze of beautiful forms to be drawn, and of benefits to be heaped on all the world; and her first measure in the morning was to write a dispatch to Edgar, begging him to come and support her at the interview, and almost laying her gains at his feet.

All day she expected him to show himself, full of advice, joy, and congratulation; but he came not. Her note must have missed him, she supposed; and she had to experience the lack of sympathy, for Spooner had come almost before breakfast was over, and Marilda had immediately gone back with him into the City; and Mrs. Underwood was not sure whether it were *comifo* to be elated about selling a picture, and had no council to give between Cherry's sketches of the robin with the wheat-ear, the monk and his olive tree, the blessing of the swallows, or the widow Euphrasia and her straw.

When Marilda did come home, she was more glum than Cherry had ever seen her. She would not even guess why Edgar made no answer, but advised that no one should think about it. Man could not be always dancing after woman. She was in no better humour in the morning, when Cherry expressed her security that though he might have come home too late to answer her note, he would not fail her at the appointment.

No such thing, he did not come for her; nor did she find him at the studio, where Mr. Renville was however a perfectly kind and sufficient protector, in the arrangements with the courteous and gracious old nobleman who viewed it as a duty to encourge art, and intended the pictures to adorn his daughther's drawing-room. The choice fell on Cherry's favourite, the red-breast, and altogether the interview would have filled her with transport if only Edgar had been there to share it. She could not believe him to be so changed as to neglect her out of mortification at the contrast between her success and his own; but the bare idea poisoned the laudatory critique in the Times of her two productions.

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It was Mrs Kedge's birth-day, when her family always dined with her at her old-fashioned hour of five. When they set off, Cherry faltered an entreaty that they might call and inquire for her brother at his lodgings, but this was so curtly, almost harshly, negatived, that she feared that she had unwittingly proposed something improper. Still there remained the chance of his coming to the festival, where he was certain of a welcome. It would be so like his good nature, that Cherry never relinquished the hope through the hot stuffy dinner, when, after the two elder ladies had sighed, shed a few natural tears, but wiped them soon, over the absence of poor Mr. Underwood, they took to City gossip, occasionally rallying the two young ladies on their silence and abstraction; Mrs. Kedge contriving to joke at her grand-daughter's supposed loss of her 'eart, and at Cherry for having made such a conquest with her hart.

Just as dessert came in, and Geraldine was reflecting with a sort of dreamy despair that it was the hour for driving in the park, there came a thundering knock, and Cherry bounded on her chair, exclaiming, 'There's Edgar!' while Mrs. Kedge cried out, laughing, 'Just like him! I knew he'd be in time for my preserved ginger. Ah! Mr. Hedgar, trust to—What! isn't it him? Who is it, Mary?' handing the card to her.

'Mr. Travis!' Marilda and the maid exclaimed at the same time; and the next moment he stood before the quartette, receiving a cordial welcome from all; for though Mrs. Underwood might bridle a little, she remembered that Alda was safely disposed of, and that he was now an undoubted millionaire depending on no one's good-will. Geraldine was flushed, and quivering between pleasure, shame, and the moment's disappointment; and Marilda's broad face flashed for a moment with a look of indescribable illumination and relief, then subsided into its usual almost stolid calm.

For himself, he looked more like what he had been as Peter Brown's clerk than the Life-guardsmen, for he had outgrown the boyish display of ornament, though he had never lost the fine military bearing that so well became his figure; but he now had a grand black beard, which made him more romantic-looking than ever. His countenance was as usual grave, but not so depressed or languid as formerly, and indeed it lighted into glad animation

at the unexpected sight of Geraldine, as he wrung her hand with the fervour of a brother. He sat down; but except to drink Mrs. Kedge's health he accepted none of the eager offers of hospitality, but said he was to dine with Mr. Brown at eight o'clock. He had come home on business, and not being able to wind up his uncle's affairs quickly, thought he should have to spend his time between England and America for a good while to come; but he hoped to run down and see Felix, 'and to hear about the organ.' Cherry had so much to tell him about the building of it, and of Lance's delight in the prospect, that she forgot her anxieties for the moment, till he asked after the success of the concert, and she had to tell him of Edgar and his stars. He looked at his watch, and said he should have time to see after Edgar before dinner. 'Ah, do!' said Cherry; 'and find out whether he got my note, I haven't seen him these four days!'

There was a break-up from the dining-room; and Ferdinand, smiling a sort of apology to Mrs. Kedge, offered his arm to Cherry to take her up to the drawing-room, where except on these great occasions no one ever sat; Marilda managed to linger on the stairs, so as to intercept him on his way down.

'Mr. Travis,' she said, 'you will do me a great favour, if you will call on me at our office between ten and twelve to-morrow. Can you?'

'Certainly,' he replied, much surprised; but she flew up the stairs before any more could be said.

She was at her counting-house in full time, sitting at the library-table in the private room, just like her father, opening letters and jotting on them the replies to be made by her clerks, without often needing to take counsel with Spooner.

At ten o'clock a clerk brought up Mr. Travis, and he was soon seated opposite to her, not quite so unprepared as on the previous day.

'Thank you for coming,' she said; 'I knew you were the only person whom I could trust in for help.'

'I shall be very happy,' he began. 'Is it about Edgar Underwood?'

'Do you know anything?'

'Only that no one at his rooms seems to know where he is.'

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'Ah!' (as if expecting this). 'Now, I know you would do anything for Felix Underwood and the rest, and can keep silence. To speak would be worse than anything.' He bent his head; and she went on, 'Read that. No, you won't understand it;' then collecting herself, 'Poor Edgar! you know what he is, and how he can't help running into debt. We gave him his tastes, and it is our fault. This year he managed to do a picture, an odd red and yellow looking thing, but very fine, with a lady fast asleep in the middle of a fire. Well, he thought he had sold it, and made sure of the price, when some spiteful newspaper abused it, and the shabby man was off his bargain, and left the picture on his hands. He was so frightfully downcast, and I had reason to think him so hard up, that I thought I'd take the picture off his hands; and so I popped a cheque for a hundred, done up in an envelope, into his hand, not telling him what it was—more's the pity. We were out all the next day, and he called and wanted to find out where we were gone, but the footman is stupidity itself, and could not tell him. He came three times; but we were racketting at that miserable Sydenham, and did not get home till eleven. If he had only come in and waited! The next day came Spooner to me in a terrible rage. Now, promise, Mr. Travis, that this is never mentioned. On your honour!'

'On my honour. Never!'

'My cheque had been presented with the one hundred changed into four. The clerk at the bank doubted it, and had come here, and Spooner came to Kensington about it. I believe I went nearer to a lie than ever I did before; I said it was all right, and stood to it so that they both had to be pacified. You see,' as she saw how shocked Ferdinand was, 'he was in great difficulties, and he only meant it for a trick which would have been explained directly, if only I had not been so unfortunately out of reach.'

'You don't mean that you would overlook it?'

'Well, it seems that I was altogether wrong about the value, as pictures go. Of course I thought it rather too bad, and meant to give him a piece of my mind and frighten him thoroughly; but ever since poor Cherry has been pining, and wondering at his not coming; and yesterday I got this—addressed here, no doubt that Cherry might not see it, but marked private to keep Spooner's hands off.'

She thrust a sheet of paper into his hand.

DEAR MARILDA,

Had I seen you yesterday, I should not be in my present plight. I rehearse continually in my own ears the assault I had in readiness for you for your ignorance of the market price of art. Brynhild may be worthless, but if she be worth a penny, she is worth £250, which was what that gay deceiver was to have given. I had liabilities which I had staved off; indeed, my villain of a landlord only refrained from seizing my goods and chattels on the promise of the cash instanter. Other debts I durst not face. All that was left of your father's bequest is gone in the smash of the National Minstrelsy. County courts yawned on me, and only promptitude could save me. But verily I would not have taken a sheep when a lamb would have sufficed the first wolf, if *one* would have lent itself to transformation into anything but a cool *four*. Your round hand has been the ruin of me, Polly. It must have been the loop of your *e* that undid me. Nevertheless, I had the odd £150 in my pocket to hand over as your rightful change, (and maybe have begged of you,) when thrice I failed in finding you; and as I was coming this very morning—or was it yesterday? I'm all in a maze—I saw Spooner dash by in a cab, and knew it was all up with me!

Don't believe so badly of me as he has told you, dear old Poll. I have put myself out of his reach that he may have the less chance to break Felix's heart. For myself, I don't care a rap what becomes of me; but if it be not too late, I implore you to screen him and poor little Geraldine from the knowledge. Let them think it a simple flight from creditors—true enough in all conscience, as I fear they will soon find.

If it have got wind, I need not beg you to spare them and let Lance know that I am thankful to the 'early piety' or whatever it was that kept him out of the scrape. Some day all shall be repaid; but until then you have seen and heard the last of—your not ungrateful in heart, however ungrateful in deed—the most miserable and unlucky of dogs,

T. E. U.

'Where was this posted?' asked Ferdinand.

'At Ostend. Here's the post-mark.'

'Has he sent back the £150?'

'Oh no; of course he must have that to go on with.'

'It would have been more like repentance if he had sent it.'

'No, no; he couldn't. He would have had nothing to live on. Besides, it makes no real difference. Don't you turn against him, Mr. Travis, for I have no one else to trust to. I can't tell Felix; for it might do him serious harm in his business, and he might not consent to hush it up. Then Clement is a formal prig;

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and Lance is a boy, and couldn't get away. Nobody but you can do any good.'

'And what is it that you wish me to do?'

'I wanted your advice, first of all; I had no one I could venture to talk to, lest he might think some dreadful thing his duty, and go and tell!'

'There can be no palliating the criminality of the act,' said Ferdinand gravely; but for the sake of the—the innocent—' (his lip quivered at the word,) 'it may well be concealed, since you are so generous. Vanderkist might make a cruel use of it.'

'And I think it would kill Cherry. What I wished was—since one can't write with no address—if any one could go after him, and tell him that not a soul knows. I do believe now, after this shock, he might be sobered and make a new start; not here perhaps—'

'I'll go!' cried Ferdinand. 'I'll do my business with Brown, and start by to-night's steamer. Do you know where he is likely to be?'

'His wish has always been for Italy, but it is hardly the season; and my dread is of his going to Hesse Homburg, or Baden, or some of those places, hoping to retrieve this money.'

'I'll look, I'll make every inquiry. I'll never rest till I have found him!' said Ferdinand, with the earnestness of one delighted to have found the means of rendering an important service to his dearest friends.

'I felt sure that you could and would, from the moment I saw you,' said Marilda. 'When your card came in, there seemed to open a way out of this dreadful black misery.'

'Remember,' said Ferdinand, 'it would not be right to bring him home at once on the former terms. You forgive him, and for the sake of his family you do not expose him; but he ought not to be reinstated.'

'Not only for his family's sake—for his own!' cried Marilda. 'He is just like my brother—it was only between brother and sister. But you are right,' she added, as the man's grave look of severity recalled her from her sisterly championship; 'it would only be running him into danger again. He had much better go

and study in Italy; and he can be helped there, if he will only keep out of mischief.'

She then mentioned all the haunts of his she knew of in Belgium and Germany; Geraldine might know more, but how was she to be told? Marilda had a perfect terror of renewing the condition into which she had last year been thrown, and besides feared her quickness of eye might discover the secret. She hoped to keep her in ignorance till Ferdinand could send home tidings, and make Edgar write what would be some comfort after the suspense; but when the time that, at the lowest computation, must elapse before anything could be heard was reckoned, they both felt that it was cruelty to keep Cherry in her present state. A week more would be enough to destroy her.

But Marilda, though a strong-minded woman enough ordinarily, shrunk with dismay from telling her. Should Felix be written to? There was no doubt that so soon as he heard the tidings from Cherry, or otherwise, he would hurry up to investigate and to take her home; so that to ask him to come and break it to her was hardly giving him unreasonable trouble. Besides the secret might be safer, so managed. Thus, the two generous spirits who sat in council first destroyed poor Edgar's letter, lest it should ever serve as evidence against him; and then Marilda wrote—

MY DEAR FELIX,

Geraldine will have told you that we have not seen Edgar for some time. From a note received from him, I have reason to believe that debts are the cause of his flight. Mr. Travis is kind enough to follow and see what can be done; but I do not know how to tell poor Cherry, and if you will come up I will meet you at the station at 11.30.

Your affectionate cousin,

M. A. UNDERWOOD.

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CHAPTER XXX.

THE SCULPTOR.

'Her heart, her life, her future,
Her genius, only meant
Another thing to give him,
And be therewith content.'
A. A. Proctor.

By the time Felix could obey Marilda's missive, and entered Cherry's sitting-room, she had come to such a state of mind, that not even his pale, fixed, mournful face was needed to make her lie back in her chair, gazing piteously up at him, murmuring, 'O Felix, what can it be? What has become of him?'

'Marilda has heard from him,' said Felix, kneeling down by her, and holding her hands.

'Heard! Oh, why did she not tell me?'

'She feared to pain you. My poor Cherry, nothing has happened to him; but his debts have come to a crisis, and he is gone off to the Continent. That good fellow, Fernan, is gone after him, to see what can be done for him.'

'And he wrote to *Marilda?*' asked Cherry, greatly bewildered.

'Yes; from Ostend.'

'He wrote to her! Did you see the letter?'

'No, she had made away with it. She was so shy and short about it, that, Cherry, I suspect that distress had brought poor Edgar, as a last resource, to try whether she would accept him.'

'Oh!' cried Cherry, starting forward with conviction, 'that would account for it all!' And she told of all that had passed about Brynhild, now ten days ago—Edgar's despair, Marilda's ready assistance, and the manner of acknowledging it; and both agreed that there was strong presumption that he had taken her kindness as encouragement to venture on a proposal. This would fully account for her silence and ill humour; and the delusion, perfectly unsuspected by her, was the best possible auxiliary in guarding her secret, by preventing the brother and sister from pushing her hard with inquiries, and sufficiently explaining whatever was mysterious. Indeed, if Edgar had had the face to make

the proposal, there was some grace in the shame that had caused his disappearance; and luckily for Marilda, Cherry was far too modest and shame-famed to allude to her own suspicions. She only longed exceedingly for home, and yet could not bear to leave the readiest place for receiving intelligence.

Felix could not of course rest without doing his part towards inquiring, and went off to Edgar's lodgings, and also in quest of the National Minstrelsy people, whom Lance had assured him to be the most likely to give him information. He came back depressed and jaded, and went straight to his sister's room. She could see in a moment that he had found out nothing.

'Nothing! The National Minstrelsy shut up a month ago. Allen and his family had left their lodgings, and given no address. I tried the post-office, but they grinned at me, and said many gentlemen came inquiring. I went to two or three music-shops, and asked after him and after the Hungarians, but with no better success; no one knew anything about them. Then I found my way to his lodgings.'

'Ah! I wanted so much to have called there, but Marilda would not let me.'

'As well you did not. Did you know that he had his rooms in partnership?'

'No—never!'

'Nor heard him speak of a man—an artist, named Malone?'

'Yes. I have heard of him. He has got two pictures in the British Institution. Poor Edgar wanted me to admire them, but I couldn't; they are Scripture subjects—Ruth and Rachel—made coarse and vulgar by being treated with vile reality—looking like Jewish women out of fruit-shops. He always said Tony Malone was the best fellow in the world, but he never told me he lived with him.'

'I was quite taken by surprise. The poor little miserable looking maid said Mr. Underwood had not been there for ten days; and when I said I was his brother and wanted to ask some questions, she fetched her mistress, who said he had paid up just before he went away, but that he had given no notice, so there was this ten days. Of course this was reasonable; besides, I wanted to bring home his things; so she took me up to his rooms

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while she went to make out his bill, and I thought entirely that I had come wrong, for I found myself in such a den as you can hardly conceive—light enough of course, but with the most wonderful medley of things imaginable, and in the midst a table with breakfast, and a brandy bottle; a great brawny sailor, half stripped, lying on the floor, a model for Samson, or Hercules, or somebody; and this man with a palette on his thumb, a tremendous red beard, and black elf locks sticking out all manner of ways. And that was the place he wanted to take Lance to!'

'He wouldn't have let it get bad if Lance had been with him. Besides, you old bachelor, don't you know that an artist must live in a mess and have models?'

'Of course, I know that, Cherry. I did not expect things to be what your friend Renville makes them for his young ladies; but the odour of spirits, the whole air and aspect of the place, had something that gave me a sense of hopelessness and dissipation, when I found that those really were Edgar's quarters, and that he had concealed his sharing them with this Malone ever since he left Renville. The man behaved very well to me, I will say that for him, as soon as we had made each other out, and seemed very fond and rather proud of Tom, as he chose to call Edgar; but he is a prodigious talker, and a rough coarse kind of fellow, exactly what I couldn't have fancied Edgar putting up with.'

'I dare say it was out of good nature.'

'Half of it, no doubt; indeed, he gave me to understand as much. Edgar can't but be kind wherever he goes; even that wretched little slavey cried when I gave her a shilling for helping his things into a cab, and she found he was never coming back! I should think he had spoken the only kind words she had ever heard in her life.'

'But this man must have told you something! Had he no notion where he is gone?'

'None at all! He knew thus much, that Edgar came into his room about ten o'clock in the morning—he couldn't tell what day, but we made it out it must have been on Thursday the 3rd—'

'The day after we went to Sydenham. Well!'

'—Looking pale and scared, and saying, "I'm done for, old

fellow—I'm off!" That is all he is clear of, for he was just waked and fast asleep again directly.'

'At ten o'clock in the morning!'

'Well, Cherry, I'm afraid there had been a carouse the night before. Edgar had sold his picture, you see, and had cleared off old scores—a few of them, at least. He was restless—Malone said in and out—all the day before; he could not make him out. I fancy he had sent his letter to Marilda, and was awaiting a reply, which she must have sent, or he have called for, early the next morning; and after holding off all day from the jollification in honour of the sale of his picture, and deputing Malone and his other friends to hold it without him, he joined them at the theatre towards ten o'clock, and went to a cider cellar with them afterwards, where I should gather that he was in a state of reckless merriment, but quite sober—yes, Malone eagerly assured me of that, as if that were a merit to be proud of in my father's son! Well, poor fellow!' added Felix, his bitter tone changing to sorrow, 'he seems only to have thrown himself down on his bed without undressing; but Malone, who made no secret of having been "screwed" himself, only knew of his looking in in the morning. He had driven up, it seems, in a cab, which he kept waiting—not ten minutes, the landlady says—and he carried off his violin case and about as many clothes, I should imagine, as he could stuff into his portmanteau in the time—not by any means all; but one thing at least you will be glad to hear of, Cherry, the photograph of my father! Yes, I am quite certain of it; for when Malone was helping me to collect the other little matters out of his little hole of a bed-room, he said, when we came to the mantel-piece, "Yes, that's the only thing he has taken—the photo that stood there; a parson far gone in decline, the very moral of himself—your father, wasn't it?"'

'At least that is a comfort! Poor Edgar, I am sure he will soon write, even if Ferdinand misses him. You have brought his things?'

'Only his clothes, his sketches, and a book or two. His jewellery—he used to have a good deal, I think.'

'Never so much as Fernan, but in better taste.'

'That was gone. I thought it right to take an inventory of

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what I took away, and get it attested by the landlady and Malone; and I left it with them, in case the creditors should think I had taken anything of value.'

'The creditors, ah!'

'Yes. I have brought a carpet-bag stuffed choke full of bills, as heavy as I could carry, though of course many are the same over again. Time enough to look them over at home.'

'And paying?'

'No. I am not liable for them.'

'But, Felix, you cannot let his name be dishonoured!'

'My dear Cherry, that is talk out of books. I have no right to give away what barely suffices for maintaining and educating the younger ones, for the luxury of satisfying these claims and clearing Edgar's name. It would be robbing the innocent for the sake of the guilty.'

'O Felix, how can you?'

'Guilty at least of extravagance and recklessness, Cherry, though in a generous way. He had paid up, as I told you, for the lodging—all for Malone as well as himself; and when the landlady brought up an exorbitant bill, charging my country innocence three months in advance, Malone fought her with such vehemence, that I never came in for such a battle royal, and was ready to cut and run, only to be quit of the pair of them; and after all she subsided, and was content and civil with only a fortnight in advance!'

'I think a great deal must have been the fault of those musical people. I know Edgar risked some of Mr. Underwood's money with them.'

'All, I believe, that he did not owe, or was not forced to pay immediately, and that was a regular smash; but I do not think he was liable for any of their debts. These looked to me more like personal luxuries.'

'Well, Felix, if you will not pay them, I will, as I can, and when I can.'

'Do not say I *will* not, Cherry, but ask yourself whether I ought either to incur a debt myself, to trench on the capital of the business, or take home the children from school. You know, for we have tried, that stinting more than we do already becomes privation; such as, though we elder ones might willingly endure it

for our feelings' sake, exacerbates the younger ones, and really would be unjust towards them.'

Cherry hung her head, with tears in her eyes. 'And is that just to the creditors?' she said.

'Well, Cherry, I cannot say I have much pity for the tradesmen who trust such a young gentleman as Edgar. If it be their system, depend upon it, they have means of compensation. Chérie, sweet, indeed I am not hard-hearted, I would cut off my right hand to bring that dear boy back a free man. When we hear from him—and I have looked over those miserable bills—I may find some means of compounding with the creditors; but I cannot despoil Angel and Bernard and Stella of education or comfort for what he has done.'

'But I can—I will—I may,' cried Cherry, with excitement; 'I shall be able to do it all; Mr. Renville said I might make £300 a year, and that would soon do it! You will not hinder me, Felix?'

'No,' he said, kissing her; 'it's not the way in which your earnings ought to go, my Cherry; but you are quite free, and it will make you happier, I know.'

'And you will not let Marilda help?'

'No, not if it can be helped without wounding her too much. You see she is taking her own measures through Travis.'

'I could not endure her doing it,' said Cherry, glowing with a sort of pride. 'And I am the one who ought. My drawing would have been worth just nothing at all but for him; and all this success is through him, and it is so cruel he can't have it, when it signifies so much more.'

'So Sir Bors always thinks,' said Felix, fondling her; but true to his own faith, he continued, 'But Edgar is not past the age for success yet. Only three-and-twenty, remember, and this grievous lesson may be just the making of him. We know he has a warm heart and plenty of power; and though we must make up our minds not to see him for a good while, he will come home from Italy some day a made man.'

'Oh yes, his sketch of Brynhild shewed that he could do anything. Do you know, I think that having such a companion as that Mr. Malone almost accounts for his having gone wrong. If he can only fall in with some real nice companions! If he would

CHAP. XXX. board at Munich with some family like the dear Frau Renville's. What a letter we will write to cheer the poor dear fellow up!'

Felix and Geraldine never failed one another in that cardinal article of theirs, trust in Edgar's genius, and in the love that hoped all things, believed all things, and endured all things from him—all things personal, namely, for Felix never entirely overlooked the having tried to tempt away Lance into the life of which one passing glimpse was enough for his fastidious home-bred spirit, unable to appreciate the fascination of freedom and unconventionality. Altogether they had talked themselves into hope and consolation that surprised Marilda, when, after waiting till her patience could endure no longer, she knocked at the door, to ask whether Felix had discovered any clue by which Edgar could be traced.

It was one of those requitals of generosity that are felt inadequate because the generosity is really unsuspected. Felix and Cherry *could* not be as unreserved with her as if they had felt her a sister and one of themselves, and not as one whose bounty Edgar had abused. They did not—nor was it in the nature of things that they could—understand that Marilda's feelings towards him were as fraternal as their own, nay, had the force of exclusiveness, and the tenderness of protection; and so, though Felix replied to her inquiries, it was not with the detail and confidence he had shewn towards his sister; and the more she questioned and remarked, the more they both felt inclined to shrink into themselves. In fact, they knew so little worse of him than before, that after the ten days' agony there was a sort of reaction, without much visible weight on their spirits. Felix had business which made it needful to stay another day; and as he was going out Cherry begged him to take charge of a small box containing a cast which Mr. Grinstead had lent her to copy, and she did not like to entrust to any chance hand.

'If you would send in your name,' she said, 'I think he would let you see his studio, and I do so want you to see his figure of Mercy knocking at the wicket-gate.'

'I thought he never did admit strangers.'

'Oh! Geraldine is favoured,' said Mrs. Underwood, with a laugh. 'Depend upon it, anyone belonging to her will have the

entray. But go, go by all means. They say his house is a perfect little bijou.—Isn't it, Geraldine? She went to a party there, you know, chaperoned by Mrs. Renville, and met Lord de Vigny.'

Felix knew all about it, much better than did Mrs. Underwood —that little select dinner of the *élite* of the world of art and genius, to which Mr. Grinstead had asked Cherry about a fortnight ago, and which she had described with such delight. He had not much heart for strangers and works of art at that moment, but he could not refuse Cherry's commission, nor vex her by omitting to ask to see the studio; so there, in the course of the morning, he found himself, alone at first among the statues and casts—grave and graceful creations—more from the world of Christian than of classic poetry, and if less æsthetically beautiful, more solemn and more real.

He had gone in meaning only to fulfil his duty to Cherry, but he found himself attracted and enchained, and was standing before Cherry's favourite figure of Mercy, drinking in, as it were, the beseeching wistful spirit of faint hope that breathed from the whole figure, when a crimson curtain was lifted, and a gentleman of about five-and-forty or fifty, but grey-haired and looking older, came with a soft tread towards him.

'Mr. Underwood, I believe.'

Felix bowed.

'I am very glad to have the pleasure of making your acquaintance.'

'I am very much obliged for my admission. I should not have ventured, but that my sister was so anxious that I should see what she enjoys so much.'

Mr. Grinstead smiled, and quietly did the honours, while Felix —though, of course, untrained—modestly showed himself full enough of taste and intelligence to be worthy of an artist sister; Mr. Grinstead treating him all along like an honoured guest, and taking him farther into his private rooms, to see some favourite old German paintings, and to offer luncheon.

The house did indeed deserve Mrs. Underwood's term, fitted up with all that carved wood and well-chosen simple colour could do; and with wondrous gems of art—all the refinement and

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beauty that a bachelor, when he *does* choose, can bring together, even better than a lady can.

'How long shall you be in town?' had been an early question, answered by, 'I take my sister home to-morrow;' and then, when it had struck Felix that his host was becoming increasingly thoughtful and absent, and he was trying to take leave, but was always prevented, Mr. Grinstead asked, 'Should I be likely to find your sister at home if I called this afternoon?'

'Not early,' said Felix; 'I think she has some commissions to finish. I am to meet her at five. I am afraid I must wish you good morning.'

'A few minutes longer. Mr. Underwood, I must begin by making you a confession, and asking you a question. Do you think there is any chance for me with that sweet little sister of yours?'

'With Geraldine!' Felix laid hold of the back of a chair, feeling as if his senses almost reeled, though whether consternation or exultation came uppermost, he could not have told.

'Yes,' was the reply. 'I am speaking abruptly, but I am taken by surprise at finding that you intend so soon to take her away. Indeed, I believe these are matters on which long consideration often ends in a sudden plunge,' he added, smiling a little, as if he wondered a little to find himself in a situation that seemed to reverse their ages; indeed, Felix was by far the most embarrassed.

'I do not think she is at all prepared,' was all that occurred to him to throw into the gulf of silence.

'Perhaps not,' said Mr. Grinstead, rather wistfully. 'I see you think the notion a preposterous one,' he continued, with something unconsciously of the elder's tone towards inexperienced youth, though there was pleading in it too; and he put a chair in his visitor's way, and speaking quietly though eagerly, as Felix tried to utter some polite disclaimer: 'I see the disparity myself, though perhaps less strongly than you do. Forty-six does not feel itself so vast an age as five-and-twenty may think it. The truth is this. I was made a fool of, as befalls most of us' (Felix looked more assenting than he knew, poor fellow!), 'and was hit harder than some, I believe. At any rate, the distaste it gave me was invincible, till I met with that wonderful compound of bright-

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ness and tenderness—spirit and sensitiveness—I cannot help it. She has haunted me ever since I first met her last year; and if there be nothing in the way on her side, I believe I could make her happy.'

'There is nothing in the way,' repeated Felix, as an honest man, but with a sense of a jewel being dragged from him, and relieved to have something to say that was not all consent. 'It is a very great honour for our little Geraldine to be so thought of, but I think you should be aware that she has nothing of her own, and—poor child—is sadly frail and feeble in health.'

'For that,' said Mr. Grinstead, 'I think you may trust her to my care;' and he spoke eagerly, as if longing to be taking care of her. 'And though I am a self-made man, I have had prosperity enough to be able to secure a comfortable provision for her.'

'Thank you—yes,' hastily said Felix. 'It was not that I was thinking of.'

'I see you are against me,' said the sculptor, perhaps anticipating the answer that actually came—'Selfishly, sir; only selfishly. Geraldine is so much our life and light at home, that your —your proposal was a shock to me; but I see the very great advantage it would be to her, and I could not desire anything better for her.' There were tears in his eyes, and the last words came with a choking utterance.

'I see,' said Mr. Grinstead, 'that I am doing a hard thing by you, and that to hold out the idea of her becoming even more to you sounds like mockery. Besides, I am too far from secure to begin to spare any pity for you. Now tell me, can I see her this evening? Where are you to meet her?'

'I am afraid I cannot propose your joining us then,' said Felix, more cordially, 'for it is to be at the Baker Street Bazaar, about some very domestic shopping; but I believe we shall come home between six and seven o'clock.'

'Very well; you will find me there. You will use your own judgment as to preparing her.'

Very domestic shopping indeed it was. The ancient coal-scuttle, a Froggatt legacy, had three decided holes in it, and Wilmet had a vision of one glimpsed in Baker Street. She would

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not trust either Felix or Cherry to choose it separately, but conjointly she thought they might counterbalance one another, and combine taste, discretion, and economy; and they were both afraid of failing her.

The very contrast of that commission, and the importance ascribed to it, with the ease and luxuriousness in Mr. Grinstead's house, served to bring before Felix the sense of the promotion for Geraldine that he was so ungratefully accepting. Little tender being, the first to wither under the blight of penury, how could he grudge her the sunshine of ease and wealth, cherishing care, prosperity, beauty, society—all that was congenial to her? No, indeed—he rejoiced. Yet how rejoice—when every time he came in from his work, he felt it a fresh blank when he did not meet her responsive look of welcome, or hear the half-quaint, half-pathetic tones that made much of the tiniest adventure of the day. His heart was sore enough at Edgar's evasion, and to lose Cherry from his hearth would quench its most cherished spark. He had been so secure of her, too. She had seemed so set apart from marriage, so peculiarly dependent on him, that it had been to her that he had turned with a sort of certainty as his companion in the life of self-sacrifice that he knew to lie before him. It was no small part of that sacrifice, that as he went to and fro on foot and by omnibus in the busy streets, he was schooling his spirit to look on the change not as desertion of himself, but as a brilliant and happy prospect for the little sister, who had powers and tastes such as ought not to be buried in the room over the shop at Bexley. He must keep the regret well out of mind, or he could never persuade her naturally, or avoid poisoning her happiness.

Should he prepare her? That must be left to chance. And chance was not favourable, for when he had found his way into the pit at the Baker Street Bazaar, appropriated to ornamental ironmongery, he saw her accompanied by Robina and Angela, whom Mrs. Underwood had good-naturedly sent for to spend her last afternoon with her. There was a sort of pang when Cherry's face greeted him, and her hand nestled into its accustomed hold on his arm just where it had leant by preference these sixteen years; and as she said in her low playful tones, 'Is it not a curious

study to see invention expended on making an intrinsically hideous thing beautiful by force of japan, gilding, and painting? You see the only original design nature provided for a coal-scuttle is the nautilus shell, and unluckily that is grotesquely inappropriate! Just look at the row of ungainly things craning out their chins like overdressed dwarfs. I am decidedly for the simplest and least disguised, though Robin is for the snail, and Angel, I believe, for that highly suitable Watteau scene. Which do you vote for?'

'The most likely to satisfy Wilmet,' said Felix absently, knowing he should hate whichever it might be, and wondering who would ever again put so much interest into common things.

'The scuttle of Mettie's dreams appears to be no more,' said Cherry; 'but as Robin always seems to me guided by her spirit, I am inclined to think it safest to go by her judgment.'

'Robin represent Wilmet?' repeated Felix, scanning the plump, honest, sensible face, as that of his destined housewife; and not a bad prospect either practically, though without the charms that specially endeared Cherry.

She thought him absent, feared he had heard some fresh ill tidings of Edgar, and though reassured on that head, lost the zest she had caught up, and the selection was pretty well left to Robina.

There was no opportunity of confidential talk; the children were with them all the rest of the drive, and were to return with them to dinner; and that Angela was much shocked and subdued by the tidings of Edgar's flight did not conduce to privacy, since it silenced the tongue that generally sheltered any conversation! Nor could Felix succeed in hurrying his three ladies: they had a great deal still to do, and awe of Wilmet made them very particular in the doing of it, so that it was not till perilously near dinner-time that he brought them home, and there, on a hurried excursion to the drawing-room to notify the arrival, was Mr. Grinstead discovered. He had called, avowedly to wish Miss Underwood good-bye; and the mistress of the house, with perhaps an inkling of the state of affairs, had asked him to stay and dine. She could not help it, as she said, in excuse to her daughter, who always hated clever men, especially associated the sculptor with

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all the misery of the day of Alda's rupture with Ferdinand, and also wanted to have had Felix to herself this evening.

So she favoured the party with as little of her civility or conversation as possible; not that it was much missed, for Cherry was perfectly unsuspecting, and expanded into wit and animation as usual; and Mr. Grinstead, to Felix's surprise, was not rendered either silent or *distrait* by his suspense; and Felix himself had learnt conversation as a mechanical art in his trade, and could do his part, with cares and anxieties packed away.

After the ladies were gone, there only passed the words—

'Can I speak to her?'

'I will fetch her.'

'You have not prepared her?'

'I had not a moment.'

'Better so, perhaps.'

Felix led the way to her painting-room, having luckily delayed just long enough not to encounter the two children fetching the purchases for a great display. From this discussion, so dear to the female heart, he snatched the unsuspicious Cherry, with the few brief words that Mr. Grinstead wished to speak to her in her sitting room.

'An order! oh, it must be an order!' echoed among the sisters; and as Angela skipped up after them to fetch some further article to be shown off, there was no opportunity of even a hint except from Felix's agitated face, and the unconsciously convulsive squeeze of the little fingers between his arm and his side. He put her in a chair, and hurried off, disregarding the 'O Felix, are you going?' but shutting the door, and returning to the dining-room to keep a restless watch.

It lasted—what must have been a shorter time than he expected, terribly long as it seemed. Mr. Grinstead came downstairs, and Felix's heart bounded at the first footfall.

The kind, far-seeing, thoughtful face did not betray much. He held out his hand. 'Thank you, Mr. Underwood,' he said; 'I hope I did not distress her much. I have only one entreaty to make to you. If you should find that there is any allowance to be made for the surprise and shock, and newness of the idea, you will be a true friend, and not let pride or delicacy prevent you from letting me know.'

'I will not,' said Felix, ready to promise anything to comfort a man who had lost the Cherry he retained.

'It is nonsense, though,' added the sculptor; 'she is much too sincere and transparent a creature to trifle with feelings. Those innocent things are not to be won so late in life. Go up to her. She will want you. What a rival you are! I will make my excuses to the ladies.'

Felix held out his hand, too sorry for him now to know what to say; and after a strong grasp, they went their different ways.

Felix found Geraldine cowering down in her chair, with her hands clasped together over her forehead. She looked up at him, as if startled by his entrance. 'O Felix, how could you?' broke from her.

'My dear, I could not help it. Has it been so very distressing?'

'Oh!' with a great gasp, 'I'm sure to refuse; a man is the most horrible thing in the world—except to accept him! And such a man too—so great and good and kind. You shouldn't have let him do it, Felix.'

'Don't scold me, Cherry; how was I to know you would not like it?'

'Felix! an old man like that!'

'Well, that's decisive,' said Felix, laughing at the tone; 'but, indeed, I did think you admired him very much.'

'So I do—but not in that way—not so as to bear to see him lower himself—and—and have to grieve him—' and the tears started from her eyes. 'But you know, he only could have done it because he saw a poor little lame thing and wanted to take care of her.'

'I think it goes a good deal deeper than that, Cherry.'

'I'm very sorry,' said Cherry. 'How very disagreeable it is that such things will happen; I thought, at any rate, that I was safe from them; and he was such an old man, and such a kind friend, that I was so proud of; and now I have vexed him so—and it is all over.'

'Do you really regret it? are you sure you did not speak only in the first surprise?'

'Felix! you! you to be against me!'

'Not against you, Chérie,'

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She interrupted with a cry of pain. 'Oh! don't let anybody call me that till Edgar comes home again!'

'My poor Cherry!'

Then there was a silence; her head was on his shoulder, and she was crying silently, but so profusely that he could not tell whether her tears were all for Edgar or for new feelings stirred in her heart.

'Cherry dear, don't you think we ought to look at it reasonably? If you do not feel as if you cared for him—like a novel—yet still—'

'Hush, Felix! he is much too good to be accepted any other way.'

'I am not sure that he thinks so.'

'I do, then!' said Cherry, raising her head up indignantly. 'I should be ashamed to marry any man without! A lame, sickly, fretful thing like me ought to bring real love at least, to make up to a man for being bothered with her. Come, Felix, have done talking sensible nonsense! I know you don't wish it, so don't pretend.'

'I am making no pretence. It would be a dreadful business for me; but all the more I think I ought to make you consider.'

'Consider! Oh! I'll consider fast enough; that beautiful drawing-room, with the statues, and the conservatory—and a carriage—and going to Italy! Do you think I am going to be bribed by things like that?'

'No; but to have one so fatherly, kind, and tender—'

'As if one wanted one's husband to be fatherly!'

'—And the safe position—'

'I declare you are talking just like Alda!'

'But if you don't like him, there's an end of it.'

'I like him, I tell you; but not so much as the tip of your little finger!'

'Perhaps not, now; but—'

'Felix! You don't want to get rid of me? I know you were right to argue with Wilmet, and persuade her, because she had let her heart go, and only was afraid to acknowledge it; but mine isn't gone, and couldn't go. If I had not learnt to work, and had not a work to do, I might try to think of freeing you from a

burthen; but now that I have, why should I upset it all, and wrench myself away from you? When I lean against you, I have got my home, and my rest, and all I want here. I never go away from you but I feel that I *do* want you so; and when one feels that, what's the use of looking out for somebody else?'

'Dear little Sweetheart! Yes!' as she lay contentedly against him, with his arm round her; 'it only makes me tremble, that you should give up a home like that, and risk so much upon my one life. The other boys love you dearly, but they are more likely to make ties for themselves! and if—'

'I should love you better dead than any other man alive!' cried Cherry impetuously. 'I won't do it, Felix! so spare your dutiful remonstrances! I do hate them so, and I know you don't mean them.'

'Mean is not the word, Cherry. The more I hated making them, the more I felt bound to do so.'

'There, then! You've done.'

'Yes, I've done. My Cherry, my Cherry! you don't know how much lighter the world seems to me than it did half an hour ago!'

'O you foolish old Giant! And there come those irrepressible children! Oh! I hope and trust they have not found it out!' cried Cherry, bounding up from her sentimental attitude, as Angela was heard galloping up the stairs.

But there was this benefit in dealing with a veteran, that he knew how to keep his own counsel and other people's. Angela came dashing in. 'Oh! here you both are! Mr. Grinstead said he had forgotten, after all, to give you this letter. He said you had better write to the lady herself. It is a capital order, he said —you've been settling about it, haven't you? What *are* you going to do?'

'I don't quite know, Angel,' said Cherry, seeing the letter was addressed in a strange hand to the sculptor; and thereupon venturing to open it, and finding it contained a request to obtain from Miss Underwood an engagement for a set of studies similar to those in the exhibition, if it were true that these were not for sale. It was from a lady of wealth and taste, whose name was well known as a patroness in the artist world; and Cherry

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could quite understand that Mr. Grinstead had kept it back, with the feeling that were she his, no toil should be hers for the future.

That was little recommendation. Her first rise out of uselessness gave her more exultation in its novelty than did even the exercise of her art or the evidence of its success. There was something exquisite in the sense of power. She had made up her mind to give Wilmet quarterly the same amount as was charged for Lance, to set aside just enough besides to clothe herself, and that the remainder of her earnings should liquidate Edgar's debts; so that some day she should write to him to come home a free and unburthened man. Viewed in this aspect, that huge carpet-bag, stuffed to bursting with bills, had not so frightful an aspect, but rather seemed to her a dragon to be conquered for Edgar's sake; and Felix laughed at her for tendering him the cheque for her Acolyte, and asking him just to pay off a few of them before leaving town. He had to explain to her that equity and custom required that no one should have the preference, and that she must wait till she could either pay off the whole, or else make payments of so much in the pound.

'Like a bankruptcy! That can't be worth while. Those are your business ways!'

'I fear you little know what you have undertaken. Remember, there is no call to pay any of it.'

'Indeed! Oh! why does not that tiresome Ferdinand write?'

'There has not been time.'

'He could have telegraphed!'

Marilda was likewise much disappointed at hearing nothing; but discussion was trying to her, and she dreaded her cousins' sharp eyes so much, that it was a relief to her to escape them. Nor could they linger, for Wilmet was anxious about Lance, who was exceedingly miserable; and in his anxiety hardly knew what he was about, scarcely what he said.

If Wilmet wished him to feel what a narrow escape his had been, he broke into despair that he had not been with Edgar. The room and the room-mate that had seemed so disgusting to home-bred Felix, had fascinated him by their charming disregard of wearisome propriety, and their congenial eccentric liberty; and

the picture of Edgar coming home in his distress to his sleepy, half-conscious comrade made him wretched. He treated regret like censure, and alarmed as much as scandalised Wilmet by longings to have been there to share the wanderings, which, even if they amounted to starvation, could not, he averred, be 'half so hateful as standing behind a counter.'

Perhaps he had never before been so near showing temper as in his arguments with Wilmet, and his determination to defend Edgar through thick and thin; and she was almost relieved when after the disappointment of finding that there was no news from Ferdinand, he collapsed into one of his attacks of headache. Nay, for weeks, though about again and at work, the lad was not well nor thoroughly himself; he seemed, like Cherry, to be always watching for tidings that never came, and unlike her, he made light of whatever could be construed into censure of any taste of Edgar's.

Felix, though unwilling to pain him, thought it might be wholesome to let him see for himself the facts of Edgar's life, and accepted his assistance in sorting the bagful of revelations of self-indulgence and dissipation, which he knew Lance's lips might defend, but never his conscience.

Judging as well as they could by the dates and charges, there had not been much amiss except carelessness of expenditure before Alice Knevett's defection, eighteen months back; but this had been succeeded by a launch into every sort of excitement, so increasingly painful and disgraceful, that Felix declared at times that it was profanation to let the proceeds of Geraldine's pure and high-minded art be spent in discharging such obligations. There were traces of an endeavour to pull up after Tom Underwood's legacy, which would have far more than cleared Edgar, if he had been satisfied to do more than merely pay 'on account,' and stave off difficulties, until the main body of the bequest had vanished between gambling and the crash of the National Minstrelsy.

Meantime the weeks of Edgar's silence and absence were running on to months, and nothing was known. Ferdinand Travis's quest had been an utter failure. Baden, Homburg, Spa, Munich, Paris, Florence, Rome, Monaco, had been searched in vain; ingenious advertisements in the second column of the 'Times' were unnoticed;

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and though there was no outward difference in the manner of the two who loved him best, each bore about a heavy yearning heart-ache and foreboding—the one, that there must be something, worse than was known, to lead so affectionate a person thus utterly to efface himself; the other, that some terrible unknown accident, lake-storm or glacier-crevasse, could alone account for such pitiless disregard of home suspense. His relics had been hidden away like those of the dead, with sad reverence; and his name was never mentioned except now and then in low sad tones in a *tête-à-tête.*

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CHAPTER XXXI.

THE BARBE BLONDE.

'"And neither toil nor time could mar
Those features, so I saw the last
Of Waring." "You! O never star
Was lost here, but it rose afar.
Look east, where old new thousands are."'

Browning.

THE first thing that really cheered Lance was an enforced holiday of the organist, when he was asked to undertake the church music in the interregnum. He threw himself into the work, consulted Dr. Miles, who lent him books, and gave him lessons; and the whole current of his thoughts became so soothed and changed, that Felix attended to no remonstrance on the danger of unsettling him, but truly declared that the few hours he weekly gave to scientific music was more than compensated by his increased power of attention, and steadiness of concentration on his business, as if he there found the balance needed by his sensitive nature.

His head too, instead of aching more, as Wilmet had feared, suffered less; but there was a change in him. He had experienced the bitterness of sin, as nearly and as bitterly as was possible to one yet intact. He had looked down an abyss, and been forced to recognise that had he followed Edgar into what he had tried to believe merely exciting, artistic, or free, he could hardly have been spared a flaw in his life. It was when wrapt in the grandeurs of

sacred harmony that this sense dawned on him. It was most true of him that 'the joy of the Lord was his strength.' Respectability had no power over him, he had a liking for the disreputable; but his reverence and delight for the glory and beauty of praise seemed, as it were, to force him into guarding his purity of life and innocence of mind, which might otherwise have been perilled by his geniality and love of enterprise. At any rate, after the first shock to health and spirits had passed off, he retained a more staid manner, entirely abstained from his former plentiful admixture of slang, caught more of Felix's demeanour, and ceased from those kinds of sayings and doings which used only not to give his sisters an impression of recklessness because they knew he always did rectify his balance in time.

Meantime another interest arose; for John Harewood had got his promotion, and had obtained leave to come home and try for an appointment. Wilmet had reason to believe him actually on his journey, when one morning, early in October, Lance, who was waiting in the office, was startled by Will's entrance, asking, 'Have you had a telegram?' in a scarcely audible voice.

'No! What is it, Bill?' said Lance, dismayed at his countenance.

'That dear Jack!' and thrusting two telegraph papers into his hand, Will threw himself down on the high desk, hiding his face, with long-drawn gasps of anguished grief, to which he could only now venture to give way; nor did Lance marvel, as he read—

Rameses, Egypt, October 3rd, 2.30 p.m.
Major Harewood to Rev. Christopher Harewood, the Bailey, Minsterham, England.
Boiler explosion. Severe scald. No pain; probably will be none. Dearest love to W. W. and all. Poor Frank Stone killed.

The other, which had arrived at the same time, was dated,

6 p.m.
Charles Chenu, Surgeon, to Christopher Harewood.
Injuries not necessarily mortal, unless from extent. Wanted, good nurse, water-bed, linen, and all comforts.

'There's more hope in that!' said Lance.

'I have none! Don't you remember poor Tom the stoker?

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'Twas just what they said of him,' said Will, raising his face for a moment. 'And here they've sent me to tell Wilmet! I—O Lance, I just cannot do it. 'Tis bad enough at home!' and he lay over the desk again, almost convulsed with grief.

'I will go and tell Wilmet,' said Felix, who had come in unperceived by him, and received the telegrams from Lance. 'She is at Miss Pearson's. Is any one going to him, Will?'

'My poor father!' gasped William. 'I don't believe it is any good! But I shall go with him, unless— He sent me on to see whether she—Wilmet would go. You won't let her, Felix? I must go on to see whether I can get a nurse at St. Faith's.'

'I believe Wilmet will wish to go,' said Felix.

'And be the best nurse,' added Lance.

'If there were any nursing to do,' said William, looking at them in amaze. 'I haven't the least hope he can last till we can come out! But my father *will* hope—that's the worst—and wants to have her rather than me. Don't tell her so, though; I don't know what I am saying. Only she should not be persuaded to go! Oh, that it should come to this!'

'I will leave him to you, poor fellow!' said Felix, beckoning Lance to the door, as William again flung himself across the desk. 'I think she will go, and that it will be better for her.'

He was interrupted by the arrival of a telegraph boy with a message to him in his editorial capacity, which threw more light on the accident.

Telegram from Alexandria, October 4th, 7 a.m.

Serious explosion of locomotive engine at Rameses, on the Suez and Alexandria line. Engineer and stoker killed. English officer injured, without hope of recovery.

Felix gave it to his brother, and went on his melancholy way—seeing Miss Pearson first in her parlour, and then sending for his sister.

Wilmet was just what those who knew her best expected. While there was scope for action, she would never break down. She inferred at once that the surgeon expected the comforts he sent for to be of use, and dwelt upon Mr. Harewood's kindness in allowing her to accompany him. As soon as she arrived at home, she scolded William, and made him find sense and hope, which in

truth he had only lost when, instead of having to support and comfort his impulsive mother and sisters, he could afford to give way himself. He could now give a coherent account of his father's plans. Mr. Harewood was hastily arranging matters at home, and would be on his way to Southampton by the last train. If Wilmet would go with him, she was to meet him at the station—either with or without a nurse, as she might judge needful. Her decision was against the nurse. She reminded Will that his brother had with him a Christian Hindoo servant, who had already proved an efficient attendant in an attack of fever; and she herself had some experience of scalds, through Felix's accident, and one that had befallen a servant of Miss Pearson's. Expense, the prostrate despair of the family at home, and his own college duties, had alike decided that if she went out, William must remain in England; but he was despatched to St. Faith's, where the needful appliances were always kept, and could be made over in such an emergency.

Meantime Wilmet, grave but steadily calm, made her preparations. She devised means of providing a substitute at Miss Pearson's, bethought herself of everything requisite; and when Geraldine pursued her, trying to help, but panting and sobbing nervously, it was only to be put down on a chair, and warned not to knock herself up. The keys were made over to her, but without directions or injunctions; only one soft whisper—'Dear Cherry! after all, you have made me able to do this.'

Felix would not be denied going to Southampton with her. Mr. Harewood was looking out for her at the station, with the resolute mask of indifference that both must assume for the journey. He took both her hands, and said, 'Thank you, my dear; I knew I should see you.' And she said, 'Thank you, for letting me come.' Then she took charge of his plaid and umbrella, and it was plain that thenceforth she would be his guardian daughter.

When Felix and William left the two on board the Havre boat, they knew that the Wilmet of old was gone for ever. She must come back with a great change upon her; but who could guess whether that change would be for weal or woe?

On went Mr. Harewood and Wilmet by steamer and by rail, unable to obtain intelligence, and maintaining absolute silence on the one

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thought that filled their minds, each solicitously tender of the other's comfort and fatigue, though both tacitly agreed that nothing was so trying as a halt.

When they reached Marseilles, they found the P. and O. agency certain that if Major Harewood were not living it would be known; and they likewise learnt that Rameses was a sort of little French colony around a station that the works for the Suez Canal were raising to an importance it could hardly have enjoyed since it was a treasure city of Pharaoh; and, while obliged to await their steamer, they obtained counsel on the articles likely to be most needful for their patient, and hence they telegraphed an announcement of their coming, and were replied to by the Hindoo servant, Zadok Krishnu—'Not worse.'

At Alexandria they found themselves expected and welcomed. Interested countenances and sympathising greetings were ready for the father and supposed sister at both consulate and hotel; and from the name of the engine-driver, Frank Stone, who had been killed, Mr. Harewood perceived that John must have recognised in him a clever Minsterham boy, and this accounted for his having joined him on his engine, where indeed it was suspected that he had been trying to help him obviate the dangers caused by Oriental indifference and fatalism. The injuries were regarded as hopeless, from the great extent of surface; and there was a kind preparatory intimation that all that could be hoped for was to find life not extinct, for that opiates were required to such a degree that there was no consciousness. M. Charles Chenu was a clever young French doctor; and a deaconess from the Alexandrian branch from Kaiserswerth was in attendance, as well as an Englishman who had been in the train, and all the alleviation possible had been given.

That was all the comfort to be had while waiting for one of the few and tardy trains, which at length set the travellers down at the strange little town of European houses and Arab hovels in the midst of the sand, distinguished by a boulevard and line of palm trees. At the station stood a short brown-faced figure, in white turban and trousers, and scarlet tassel, sash, and jacket, who with a salute half military, half Oriental, inquired in good English for their luggage, and in reply to their anxious questions, told them

that the Sahib was lying in the same state of unconsciousness produced by opiates.

The goods, so needful to the sufferer, were all identified, and extracted at a great cost of patience, and the travellers were escorted, amid incomprehensible Arab clamours, across a *place* ankle-deep in sand, to a one-storied building of such unburnt bricks as the Israelites might have made, covering a good deal of ground, and combining the caravanserai and the French hotel. A Greek landlord and his French wife came forth, and the one talking all languages, the other only her mother tongue, but both warmly welcoming the arrivals, and assuring them that *le pauvre Monsieur* had had every care lavished on him—Dr. Chenu was there night and day.

A slender, moustached, brisk young man appeared, asking in French, in a kindly tone, whether they—especially Mademoiselle—could be prepared for so sad a sight as awaited them, but assuring them that the mere fact of life having so long continued had begun to inspire him with a sort of hope.

Mr. Harewood's French was not very available, but Wilmet made reply; and they were admitted into a low empty room, with windows shaded by screens of reed, through which came a dim light, showing a still figure, covered with light linen rags steeped in oil and spirit, which a little square figure in dark blue, with a neat net cap, was changing and renewing as fast as they dried.

All the preparation could not prevent the father from being overwhelmed, and having to turn away to grapple with the shock; but Wilmet, who had all along sustained herself with the recollection of John's reference to her awakening Lance from his deadly lethargy, without pause or shyness bent down, kissed his forehead, and called him by his name; and perhaps the full sense of his entire prostration only broke upon her when there was not the slightest token that she was heard, but the torpor continued unbroken by the faintest movement of the half-closed eyes or lips. Even then she only looked up with a piteous appealing glance to the doctor, who told her that the only chances of consciousness were in the intervals between the passing off of one anodyne and the administration of another, but that hitherto these had been spent

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in a sort of delirium of anguish, that made the renewal of the opiate immediately necessary.

Hope that at least the familiar voices might penetrate through the cloud still buoyed the new-comers up; but when the moans, restlessness, and half-utterances of dire suffering set in, the eyes opened to dim glassiness, the ears seemed neither to hear nor understand, and there was as much relief as disappointment when the slumberous potion had again brought back the senselessness. Nothing could be done but to moisten the lips and change the rags, and these seemed to dry up on one part as fast as another was renewed. The face had indeed escaped, and so had the back, and for the most part the right side, but the neck, chest, both shoulders, and the whole length of the left side were fearfully scalded, with white sodden-looking spaces, the most fatal appearance of all, worse than even a deep laceration by a splinter above the hip. Day and night Wilmet, the deaconess, and the Hindoo were changing the rags, and fanning, or keeping off the flies; and soon there was a great affection between Sister Hedwige and the young Englishwoman, who shared the same desolate room close adjoining —or rather, lay down there by turns. Wilmet spoke German enough to explain that she was not the patient's sister, but his *Verlobte*, and that in a matter-of-fact, dreamy kind of way, submitting passively to be kissed and cried over by the puffy little elderly German.

Poor Mr. Harewood could give no active assistance, and was in a sad state of isolation, unable to exchange a sentence with anybody except Wilmet and Krishnu. He tried Latin and French with the doctor; but the diversities of accent foiled him in both, and Wilmet had to be interpreter. He was a great charge to her, but a far greater comfort. There were his constant prayers, and the sight and example of his deep resignation; there was the sense of protection and sympathy, the relief and distraction of attending to him, and of gratitude for his care; and besides, he wrote all the letters, for which Wilmet had neither time nor heart. She could keep up while acting, instead of realizing, as the expression of words must have forced her to do; while the struggle in the father's mind was only not to long unsubmissively for a conscious interval at the last.

An English army surgeon, who came from Malta a day or two after their arrival, thoroughly approved of M. Chenu's treatment, but agreed in his verdict that any other expectation would be futile; recovery, though not impossible where no vital part was injured, was most improbable where nature had so large a surface to repair.

Yet the actual symptoms that would have been immediate doom did not appear, but as one dim sad day rolled by after another, the parts least hurt began to show a tendency to heal; and therewith sprang up a conviction in Wilmet's mind that there was not always a total insensibility to her presence or Mr. Harewood's, but that the face changed at their voices, and that there was a preference for her hand; and then Dr. Chenu began declaring that these English had 'complexions' like rocks, and that if it were not 'the impossible,' there would be hope; and instead of giving his anodynes with the reckless desire to stifle pain, he become cautious, modified them, and only gave them when decisively expedient.

There resulted a gradual clearing of the senses. There were lulls when pain was comparatively in abeyance, and the faculties less and less clouded, the eyes regained meaning, and smiles of greeting hovered on the lips; a sense of repose in the presence of Wilmet and his father was evident; an uneasy perception if either were absent; and at last an exchange of words—conscious words. When his awakening was marked, not by a groan of pain, but by the feeble inquiry, 'Where's Wilmet?' she felt as if she had had her reward.

Once he asked 'Where's your brother?' and when she explained that none of her brothers were with her, he seemed confused and dissatisfied; but his voice died into an indistinct murmuring; and when twice again the same inquiry recurred, she set it down to the semi-delirious delusions that the narcotics sometimes occasioned. She knew that an English gentleman had done much for him at first, and had only left him the day before her arrival; and she had regretted being unable to discover who he was from lips unused to British nomenclature, but had been too much engrossed to think much about the matter. But there were now intervals in which she fully had her John again, entirely sensible, anxious to preserve his consciousness, so as to be desirous of putting off the sedative as

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long as he could endure the attacks of suffering without it. He could listen, and sometimes talk; and the next time he returned to the puzzling question, 'When did your brother go?' there could be no doubt that he was in full possession of his understanding; and Wilmet answered, 'Dear John, I do not know what you are thinking of; Felix has never been here at all.'

'I do not mean Felix; it was Edgar.'

'Edgar! You never have seen him, you know, dear,' said Wilmet, speaking softly, as one persuaded that he was recalling a delusion.

'I know that. I never saw him at home; but he was in the train. He was the first to come to me; he said he would telegraph. Surely he did so?'

'That accounts for the correctness of the telegram!' said Mr. Harewood. 'I remember now that the wording was so well put, that it gave me hope that you must be quite yourself.'

'What was it?'

They could well tell him, for it had seemed branded in fire on their minds for days.

'Yes, that was his doing. I think I only called you *her*,' he said, smiling. 'I could trust to his knowing my *her of hers*.'

'But how did you know one another? Was it in the train?'

'No. Poor Frank Stone recognised me at Suez, and begged me to come with him on the engine. I remember his consulting me about representing the impracticability of some of his subordinates; and next after that I was somewhere on the stones, unable to stir hand or foot—not in pain, but a numbness and faintness all over me, with every sense preternaturally clear, as if I were all spirit. I made no doubt I was dying fast; and when some one came to see after me, I begged him to take down my telegram to my father while I could give it. I remember his start and cry when I gave my name. "Good Heavens!" he said. "You are not Jack? Wilmet's Jack?" and really, I hardly knew; my voice seemed to come from somewhere else; but I saw the face over me that belongs to you all.'

'And did you speak to him? But no, you were in no state for that.'

'I gave what messages I could think or speak; but the numb

faintness grew on me, and seemed to gather up all my senses. I did not seem able to care about anything when I felt myself in his hands.'

'Edgar!' repeated Wilmet, still slow to believe. 'Did you call him by his name?'

'I cannot tell; I think I did. I know I no more doubted of its being he than I do that you are Wilmet. Ah! I remember struggling between a sense that I ought, and the growing disinclination to speak, and wanting to tell him to go home, for you were all very unhappy about him. Did I get it out? Did he answer? I cannot tell! No, dearest, I know no more, nor why he is not here. Zadok must know; where is he?'

The Hindoo was summoned, and it was elicited that the English gentleman had watched over the Sahib day and night, sent the telegrams, called in the doctor from Malta, and had acted as if the patient had been his brother, only going away by the last train before the arrival of Mr. Harewood, and then leaving with him a packet only to be given up in case the Major should die without recovering the power of speech. It was claimed, and proved to contain a record of all that poor John had endeavoured to say, but written in a disguised hand, though merely in the spelling of the names betraying that the scribe had been no stranger. It was plain that he had so entirely thought Major Harewood a dying man, as to have made no attempt at concealing his own identity from him, but he had kept it carefully guarded from every one else; and Wilmet's heart smote her as she questioned, 'Would he have fled if it had been Felix or Cherry who had been coming?'

Questions were asked, and both M. Chenu and Madame Spiridione testified that the gentleman who had attended on Major Harewood had been *un jeune homme extrêmement beau—grand et blond*, but they had no guess as to his name, and merely knew that he had gone away towards Alexandria. Both there and at Cairo did Mr. Harewood write to make inquiries, but always in vain; and the trains were so few and so slow, that he could not go himself without a longer absence than seemed fitting to propose in his son's precarious state, when the very efforts that nature was making towards restoration might so easily result in fever, or in fatal changes in the wounds.

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The sight of him seemed to be only less precious to John than that of Wilmet. When in comparative ease, it was almost a basking in their presence. After his long years of foreign service, no one could guess, he said, the delight it was to look at them; and when he meditated on the journey they had taken for his sake, he would break out in wondering gratitude, not to be checked by Wilmet's simplicity of protest, 'Of course she had come; she could not help it.'

The pleasure and comfort she gave him were really serving to bear him through. Not only was her touch unusually light, firm, dextrous, and soft, but pain from her hand was not like that given by any one else, when each dressing was tortured; an when his nerves were strung to an acute misery of sensitiveness, her look and touch, her voice and gesture alone were endurable. His first powers of being entertained were shown when she talked, or sang, not indeed as her brothers could sing, but in a low, sweet, and correct voice, that had an infinite charm of soothing that weary sickness. He might strive not to be exacting; but his face showed in spite of himself that when she quitted the room the light of his life went with her, and there was nothing left him but tedium, helplessness, and sore suffering.

She only did leave him for sleep, which she could usually time while he was lulled by the anodyne, and for hurried meals at the table d'hôte, which collected almost every European in the place. Mr. Harewood likewise made a great point of taking her out every evening for a sandy walk on the boulevard under the palm trees, as a preservative of her health, much to the perplexity of the observers. She saw no necessity for leaving John, to plough her way in the hot sand; but it relieved the Librarian's mind, and was besides their opportunity for discussing questions not intended for their patient's ear.

Here it was that Mr. Harewood communicated his difficulty. He had exchanged one course at the cathedral, but could not arrange for the next, and it was imperative that he should be at home by the end of the second week in the New Year. John, though they dared now to call him better, was still immovable, and what could be done? 'Shall I,' said the Librarian, 'telegraph to William to bring out Lucy or Grace?'

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'Would that be of any use?' said Wilmet, thinking only of their scatter-brained fecklessness in Lance's case.

'They have not your faculties of nursing, my dear; but you see, I don't perceive how otherwise to contrive for your remaining.'

'Mine! I must stay!' exclaimed Wilmet, her little proprieties most entirely vanished into oblivion.

'I knew you would say so. Indeed, I still think nothing else gives a hope of pulling my poor boy through; but in that case, you see, my dear, one of the girls—or their mother—'

'She would be very uncomfortable, and all for nothing,' said Wilmet; 'and William would lose his term. You know,' and only then the colour flew into her cheeks, 'I could do very well alone if you were only to marry us.'

With such simplicity and straightforwardness was it said, that the Librarian had replied, 'The very best plan,' before the strangeness struck him, and he began to falter, 'You have—John has settled it?'

'No,' said Wilmet, crimson, but grave, steady, and earnest, 'it was only this that made me think of it; but if it can be managed without hurting him, it seems to me the most feasible way.'

This form of speech of course only proceeded from unfathomable depths of affection and reserve, and it was understood.

'Dear child,' said Mr. Harewood, 'this is the truest kindness of all. I will not thank you. You and I are too much one with him for that; but I wish his mother could have known what he has won.'

Soft silent tears were dropping fast under Wilmet's broad hat. Maidenliness would have that revenge; and she could not speak. The question of broaching the subject to John overwhelmed her with embarrassment and shamefastness, at the thought of her own extraordinary proceeding. Perhaps an impulse might have led her into proposing it to him, as she had done to his father, but the bare idea of so doing filled her with shame and dismay; and Mr. Harewood, a ceremonious and punctilious gentleman of the old school, thought it incumbent on him to lead his son to make the proposition, so that it might come at least in appearance from the right quarter.

He had to watch his opportunity, for John was by no means

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always fit for conversation, and when he was, was not willing to dispense with Wilmet's presence; and it was necessary at last to come to, 'I want to speak to you before she comes back;' and then, having calmed the restless eye that watched for her, the Librarian explained the necessities that called him home: and these were fully appreciated by the Major, who owned that it had been much to have had him for these six weeks, but therewith came a look of alarm, and the exclamation, 'Oh, but how about her?'

'She does not think of leaving you. We must consider how to arrange for her.'

'Has not Clement finished his terms? Could not he be franked out?'

'Is there not a simpler way? John, nothing would make me so happy as to leave that dear girl your wife.'

'But you go before the New Year. Father, it is not to be thought of,' he said, with a nervous movement of his right hand, which he could now partially use.

'There is no reason that I should not marry you as you lie there. She would consent.'

'Dearest! she would consent to anything she thought good for me, but the more reason that it cannot be thought of. Look at the wreck I am, and the glorious creature she is.'

'She would not accept that objection.'

'The more need that I should. Even if this place in my side do not, as I expect from day to day, gangrene and make an end of it at once, it can hardly be expected that there will not be some contraction or distortion to make an object of me.'

'Does Chenu tell you this?' asked his father, who had never had the chances so plainly set before him.

'No. Chenu does as well as any one can; but he has not the gift of foresight, and there is no use in taxing his French complaisance by asking questions that no one can answer,' he answered, with quiet calm and patience that almost overcame his father.

'I did not think you were so despondent,' he said.

'I do not think I am despondent,' was the reply; 'I feel as if I had only to lie here and wait my orders from above. I suppose

weakness and sedatives blunt the feelings, for I do not regret all that might have been, as I should have thought I should—nay, as I did, in one night of fever in India. I can only feel thankfulness for intervals like this, and the blessing of having you both with me again. Father, I would not have spoken out, but that I thought you knew it better than I.'

'So I do—so I ought, my dear boy; but I cannot cease to hope that your having been so far given back to us is an earnest that God will entirely restore you.'

'That may be yet, but in the uncertainty, it hardly seems right to take advantage of my darling's devotion to bring on her so terrible a blight in her youth and loveliness. Sending her home a widow, Father!'

'Poor child! There would be little difference in her grief; and you should take into consideration that even so, you would leave her freed from the necessity of working at that school.'

'I could do that, without injustice to Will and the girls; and there would be a pension besides,' said John thoughtfully; and his father ventured to add—

'Indeed, I think if your recovery were as partial as you would have me apprehend, it would still only be a matter of time.'

'She would have her eyes open,' said John; but he thought long before he spoke again. 'I cannot trust myself to think of it! It is so great a temptation! My Wilmet! my darling! to waste her strong young life on me!'

Mr. Harewood said no more. He had experience enough to believe such things worked themselves out without interposition; and he would have regarded it as compromising Wilmet's dignity and confidence alike to mention her words. He left the room when she returned, but nothing resulted. John was restless and uncomfortable; and Wilmet, thinking he had heard all, and deemed her forward, was unhappy, and would have become shy, if his perturbation had not brought on feverishness; and that as usual inflamed the hurts into such acute pain, that the doctor gave a stronger opiate than had been needed of late, but which at first only produced distress, moaning, and wandering. They were more anxious about him that night and all the next day, than they had been for more than a week; and only towards the second

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morning did he become tranquil enough to fall into slumber, which lasted so late into the following day, that Wilmet, after being up all night, was persuaded to lie down during the noonday heat, when she had seen his sleep become more natural, and the distressful expression relax on his countenance.

She lay on her bed in a kind of waking doze, sad, anxious, and vexed at what she thought the consequence of the proposal into which she had been betrayed, feeling desolate, and dreading as much as she desired a summons to return.

Sister Hedwige did not call her till she had had more refreshing sleep than perhaps she was aware of; and then, when she came softly into the room, his eyes shone wistfully into hers, and she knelt down by him to stroke back that stiff sandy hair of his, and cool his brow with her freshly-washed hand. He lifted his as far as he could, inviting her to clasp it; his eyes again looked into hers, and a smile came out upon his face. 'My father has put a very wonderful thing into my head,' he said; then, as the lovely colour deepened on her cheek, 'can it be so, Wilmet?'

In her own calm way she answered, 'Do you not think it will be the best way?'

'For me? No doubt of that, my dearest, sweetest, best darling!' and the feeble force of his fingers somehow caused her brow to bend down to his fervent kiss. 'You look as lovely as—no, ten times lovelier than you did on the stile when you scolded me for telling you so. Why don't you now?'

'Because I am glad my face is a pleasure to you,' she said, glowing, so as to deserve his words, in spite of the effects of her long vigil.

'Ah! sick people are privileged to be foolish to their heart's content. But, Wilmet, let us be wise for once. This must not be, till you have counted the cost.' And he repeated what he had said to his father of the likelihood of permanent effects being left.

'You would want me all the more,' she said.

'And you?'

'I should want all the more to be with you.'

Again he smiled fondly on her. 'And more, my love. How easily I may be a little worse than yesterday, and then you would have to go home alone.'

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'These things are for always,' said Wilmet; and the tears she had resolved against came in crystal veils over her eyes, and it was vain to squeeze them out.

'I am conquered,' said John, half quaintly, because he was afraid of emotion. 'Here is a hand, at least! My father must manage the rest. I can only be the most glad and thankful of men. Love, this is worth it all!' as she tenderly smoothed his hair with her soft hand in the way he liked so well.

'And oh! how nice it will be as you get better!'

'I can believe I shall, much more than I have hitherto done,' returned he. Then after a happy pause, while she still stroked his head, and they looked into one another's faces with hearts swelling with unspoken prayers, he added, 'But of one thing I must and will be sure—of your brother's free consent.'

She was so sure of it herself, that she only smiled at him; but his was a sort of soldierly punctilio that forbade the profiting by her devotion without the sanction of her family, and his father supported him in it, and wrote from his dictation, detailing the provision which he was making for Wilmet in case of his death and begging for a reply by telegraph, since there was not time for Mr. Harewood to wait for an answer by post, then signing it, with great effort, with three crooked initials.

There could be no doubt as to the answer; and Wilmet went about her preparations with her own peculiar modest dignity. The 'belle Mees' had been a marvel to the French part of the community ever since M. le docteur had shrugged his amazement at *une grande Anglaise magnifique, mais blonde et fade*, coming out instead of a professional *garde malade*, and then found by experience that her hand and head, her nerve and gentleness, equalled those of the most skilful *sœur* with whom he had ever been thrown. And when it slowly dawned on him what were her relations with the Major, his wonder at English institutions knew no bounds. He would have adored her beauty, which grew on him as something marvellous, if he had not been a little afraid of anything so lofty and so still, and so incapable of airy chatter, as he found her at the *table d'hôte*. She produced on him something of the effect of the Pallas of the Parthenon, come across from Athens to undertake his patient, or the goddess Neith as

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John sometimes called her, when he lay watching her swift needle.

The Deaconess understood her better. Wilmet was much more nearly the stately Teutonic maiden than the Grecian divinity; and Sister Hedwige had had her days of romance, and beheld a Velleda in the noble, self-possessed, helpful woman, who was equal to any of the Fliedner disciples in resource and firmness. The German mind, too, appreciated the betrothal tie; and when Wilmet, who had grown very fond of the kindly, homely *Schwesterchen*, consulted her about sending to Alexandria for the bridal white that must not be denied to John's eyes, she wept with joy, promised the willing aid of the Deaconess' establishment in procuring all she needed, and, moreover, a wreath from the myrtle they nourished in memory of home.

Wilmet's commission was not needed. She found one of the big boxes that had been in use as tables and seats opened; and Zadok diving into it under the Major's directions, and turning out parcels innumerable, among which appeared a snowy mass of India muslin, exquisitely fine and covered with delicate embroidery.

'There, Wilmet, you know what that is for.'

And with all the good-will in the world, Madame Spiridione volunteered French counsel in the cutting out, and Sister Hedwige German needling in the making; and Zadok, sitting cross-legged at the door, proved himself equal to any sewing-machine, and worked faster and better than either of the European nationalities, as indeed he was the son of a *dirjee*, or embroiderer-man, and had learnt some of his trade, though educated at a Mission school.

Dr. Chenu half despised, half envied the convenience of being married without the production of the registers of baptism, or the consent of either of the mayors or the commanding-officer, and a mere telegram, 'With all my heart,' from the elder brother; but still, Mr. Harewood was obliged to make an expedition to Cairo to arrange the formalities for the registry of the marriage, for which the Consul promised to send an official. The question was whether this gentleman should act as father to the bride, whose choice otherwise lay between M. Spiridione, Dr. Chenu, and Zadok Krishnu, and who much inclined to the last mentioned; but on

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the last day, by the very same train as brought the secretary, an unexpected arrival took place.

The one interest of Rameses was the arrival of the trains—few and far between. Mr. Harewood used to go out to count and report on the pale faces going westward, and the rosy young ones going eastward, and to capture the mail-bags and parcels that connected this Egyptian desert with the outward world. So seldom did any one halt, that he was amazed, not only to see the secretary, but a slender, black-bearded personage, portmanteau in hand, Panama hat on head, looking not indeed Oriental, but so un-English that it was startling to be accosted with, 'Good morning, Mr. Harewood; I hope your son is still going on well.'

Then it flashed on the Librarian that this was the Life Guardsman who had once ridden over to Minsterham as Alda Underwood's betrothed.

'Mr. Travis! This is unexpected! You don't bring any bad news for Miss Underwood, I trust,' he added, taking alarm.

'Oh no, far from it. I came to try to follow up this trail of poor Edgar. None of the family can,' he proceeded in a tone of apology; 'and as I have time, I can let no possibility go by.—But is it true, what they told me at Alexandria—that I am come just in time for a wedding?'

'Indeed it is, but for a very strange one. I am forced to go home when that train returns; and that sweet girl will not—nay, cannot leave my poor son. I hope it is not wrong in me to rejoice, turn out as it may. They will be delighted to see you.'

Ferdinand was made very welcome. He was a breath from home that made them feel how long they had been exiled. It appeared that he had been at Paris, vainly seeking as usual, when he had received a telegram from Miss Underwood, *i.e.* Marilda, and hurrying to England, had heard all that could be gathered from Wilmet's letter; and here he was, intending to pursue his inquiries in Egypt, and if needful extend his researches to Palestine or India, according to whatever clue he might gain.

Such exertions on the part of a stranger in blood were rather surprising; but Ferdinand seemed to think no explanation needful, and perhaps his American contempt for space rendered the wonder less. At any rate, his coming was a great pleasure. He

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was almost a brother-in-law to Wilmet, and had belonged to old days in her life, and he was intermingled with John's time of courtship at Bexley, so that to both he was like a relation; and Mr. Harewood was much relieved by his promise to remain comparatively within reach so long as it was possible that he could be of use to Wilmet or her convalescent, as they durst not yet term the bridegroom.

So, as John declared, the wedding was graced by representatives of all quarters of the world. It was on African soil, between two Europeans, and one spectator came from Asia, another from America, to say nothing of the lesser distinctions of France, Germany, Greece, Egypt, and Arabia, nor of the mingling of Aztec, Spanish, American, and English blood in the veins of Ferdinand Travis.

Bizarre as were the conditions, the marriage scene was very solemn and touching. It had proved impossible to wait for Christmas Day, as had been wished; so the 21st of December had been chosen, and the time, the cool early morning, before the heat of the day, and when light could be let in without glare or scorching, such as the noontide even of mid-winter brought.

The room was arrayed as on Sundays, not without thought of the first Paschal Feast—kept at this very place and round about it—and Mr. Harewood had robed himself, and brought out the preparations he had made in case he should arrive in time for his son's last Communion Feast, but which now served for that of his marriage.

John had so far decorated himself that he had caused M. Spiridione to trim his hair, and shave all but his habitual red moustache. There was not much possibility of alteration in his spare, freckled, sunburnt face; and his condition was chiefly evident in the prone motionlessness of his figure on the water bed, covered by a bright striped silk quilt, outside which lay one wasted hand, still scarred and stiff. He was striving to be calm and passive; but every now and then his fingers twitched, and the muscles of his face quivered with strong emotion, so that the doctor, standing behind in military uniform, with moustaches waxed into standing out like a cat's, was anxiously watching him. Krishnu, resplendent in white, red, and gold, was on the other side, with an English Prayer-book, and over

a chair his master's uniform coat and medals, of which he would not be denied the display. There too was the Greek, in his unbecoming Frank courier dress, and a few spectators who had crept in at the unclosed door for the strange sight of the English wedding.

Wilmet's matter-of-fact nature and freedom from self-consciousness were great auxiliaries to her composure. Living always in the work at hand, severance from home did not come prominently before her, and still less the strangeness of giving herself, on her own responsiblity, in a foreign land, to one who could scarcely raise a finger to accept her, and whose life hung on a thread. Of the lookers-on she never thought; she could only recollect that she was qualifying herself for the entire charge of John, and the only eyes she thought of were that one pair of pale greenish-hazel ones, but for those she took as much pains as Alda had done to face a world of gazers.

The snowy soft flow and straight folds of the muslin, beneath the green wreath on her classical braids of light brown hair, far better became the straight outline than the glossy satin, lace flutter, and formal wreath, of the London bride. The eyelids cast down, the heightened carnation, and trembling lip, rendered her grand beauty as modestly tender as it was majestic, when Ferdinand Travis led her forward, followed by the sober-suited Deaconess, by Madame Spiridione in a Parisian cap, and her little boy in full Greek costume.

Poor Fernan! he had eagerly undertaken the service he was to render to Wilmet, but it must have been a sad reminder of his own vanished hopes; and as he led her forward, his slight but fine form, noble cast of features, and clear dark colouring, so fully equalled her in good looks, that he seemed a more fitting match for her than the feeble helpless bridegroom, never at his best *extrêmement beau.*

However, no such thought crossed the minds of the parties most closely concerned as Wilmet knelt by the bedside—knelt at times when she ought to have stood, or her hand would not have been within the reach of the poor weak one over which her long soft fingers seemed to exercise cherishing guidance, with that sense of power and protection she had been used to wield through life. But though her hand was the firmer, and less nervous, it was a much

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stronger, clearer, steadier voice than could have been looked for, as if manly tenderness overcame all physical prostration, in which John Oglandby took Wilmet Ursula to be his wedded wife, rising into power and energy, as though even then the impulse of guarding, protecting, supporting, love were strengthening him; and Wilmet, on the other hand, quiet and steadfast though she was, had her eyes swimming in tears, which now and then stole down and dropped unawares on his coverlid, and the tone, though not broken or faltering, was low and choked with intensity of purpose and of prayer. 'Till death us do part,' which he had said so gravely and steadily, came from her with nearly failing breath, as though the words almost took away her resolution.

But the Psalm and the Blessing brought back her calmness, and there had never been any trembling in the hand that held her husband's; there was only thankful affection in the eyes that gazed at him while she still knelt on, and all left the chamber except the faithful friend and faithful servant, who were to share with the newly-married pair the holiest of feasts. And strangely enough, if Wilmet and her home were closely interwoven with Ferdinand Travis's first admission to Christian privileges, it had been Major Harewood's example and occasional words that had first brought the teaching imbibed in a Mission school to bear the fruit of true faith and confession thereof in Krishnu.

So it was a really happy and peaceful wedding-day in that strange far-away land; and John seemed rather the better than the worse for the exhilaration of spirits, and the sense of secure possession he had gained. He was so much delighted with Wilmet's bridal white, that he grumbled if she tried to put on her former dresses, and her first personal expense was the keeping up her stock—he loved so well to see her moving about or hovering over him in her clear pure white folds.

They were quite sufficient for one another; and Mr. Harewood left them by the next westward train. Ferdinand went to see him on board the Alexandrian steamer, and then continued to circulate in the haunts of travellers, for the chance of Edgar having joined a Nile boat, or being sketching among the tombs of the Thebaid. Every now and then he reappeared at Rameses to report how some *barbe blonde* he had been hunting down turned out fiery red,

and to communicate his hopes in some other direction. Suez was inquired through in vain; and he could not learn that any one of the name or description had gone to India. Indeed, that country seemed less likely to attract a man of Edgar's tastes than the picturesque and historical Levant; and his artist powers and charm of manner made it not unlikely that he might have been engaged to make sketches.

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One hope they had, which died away. The gentleman from the Consulate mentioned that a party of vocalists had been giving concerts of national melodies to the European population at Cairo and Alexandria; and the description reminded Wilmet of last year's meteors. Indeed, it proved on inquiry that Stanislas and Zoraya Prebel were really among them, and that they had gone forward to the East, making a tour of the British dependencies; but when Ferdinand had with difficulty obtained a sight of an old programme, and a description of the performers, it was only to convince hinself that Edgar could not have been among them. There was no name like his, and the songs that might have been his were sung at the very time when his *alibi* could be proved at Rameses.

CHAPTER XXXII.

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THE NID D'AVIS.

'It is called—I forget—*à la* something which sounded
Like alicampane, but in truth I'm confounded,
What with fillets of roses and fillets of veal,
Things *garni* with lace and things *garni* with eel,
One's hair and one's cutlets both *en papillote*,
And a thousand more things I shall ne'er have by rote.
I can scarce tell the diff'rence, at least as to phrase,
Between beef *à la Psyche* and curls *à la braise;*
But in short, dear, I'm tricked out quite *à la Française.*'

Moore.

ONE forenoon, soon after the end of the Christmas vacation, Robina Underwood was seated at her desk, working deeply at the solution of a quadratic equation; when from the far-off end of the

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schoolroom arose that peculiar hushed choked giggle, that no one ever ascribed to any cause but some prank of Angela's, more especially on the mornings devoted to her natural enemy, 'the professor of the exact sciences,' as he called himself; who was in fact a stop-gap in the absence of the University man usually employed.

Robina knew that the more concerned she showed herself the more madcap tricks were played, and she disturbed herself little about the commotion, aware that she should only too soon learn the cause, if it were anything out of the common way. So she did. In the quarter of an hour of clearance and recreation before dinner, plenty of information reached her, couched in boarding-school *lingua franca.*

'*Ah! Rouge Gorge, vous ne savez pas ce qu'elle a fait.*' '*Une fille delicieuse.*' '*Une Alouette superbe, tout a fait Angélique!*' '*Et M. le professeur! Comme il etait dans un cire!*' (These phrases being chiefly the original coinage of Angela herself.)

'*Mais qu'est ce que c'est qu'elle a fait?*' demanded the elder sister, with small sympathy with these ecstasies.

'*Le plus exquis!*' and with volubility far outrunning composition, and resulting in a wonderful compromise of languages, that a new book had been produced out of which the class had been required to work what was described as '*un somme dans le règle detrois tout à tort et a travers; detestable, horrible, vilain,*' to which a chorus chimed in, '*vilain, vilain vilainissimo.*' The question was, If twelve reapers cut a field in thirty hours, how long would it take sixteen? As a matter of course, all but a few mathematical geniuses at the head of the class had multiplied by 16 and divided by 12, and made the result 40; but Angela, having wit enough to see that this '*n'avait pas le sens commun,*' instead of trying to make out the difficulty, had written at the bottom of her slate, what was hastily transcribed for Robina's edification—

> Forty, by the best time-keepers.
> Reapers? I should call them sleepers,
> Lazy heapers, idle creepers,
> And their peepers should be weepers!

All who obtained a sight of this stanza became forthwith weepers

with suppressed giggle, and there was a stern, 'Your slate, if you please, Miss Angela Underwood.'

The effects were expressed with all the force the language could convey. '*Il etait comme un lion enragé—il écumait à la bouche—il disait qu'il appellerait Mlle. Fennimore*'—a far greater climax, but after all he only sentenced her to read the rule aloud to the class. No sooner had she touched the book than she dashed it from her, '*Comme la poison*'—'*comme un couleuvre*,' declaring it to be a shocking one, unfit to touch, so that of course the sums came wrong. Most of her audience, all girls under thirteen, for she was the arithmetical lag of the school, had no notion why the title 'Colenso's Arithmetic' so excited her—the master had none at all; and while Angela, who was not for nothing sister to a church candle or to a gentleman of the press, declaimed about heresy and false doctrine, he thought it all idleness and wilfulness, and fulfilled the threat of a summons to the authorities. By them the matter was a little better understood; but the disobedience was unpardonable, even if the testification against the author were not merely a veil for dislike to the problem, and the sentence had been solitary confinement until submission. From this Angela was so far distant, that as the young ladies marched in to dinner her voice might be heard singing the Ten Little Niggers.

It was an unlucky time, for the next day was Marilda's twenty-fifth birth-day, and she was going to keep it in a way of her own, namely, by taking the whole family of children of a struggling young doctor, over the Zoological Gardens. It was not a very good time of year, and Marilda's first proposition had been the pantomime, but the mamma had religious scruples about theatres, and it turned out that the Zoo was the subject of their aspirations; so Marilda, securing her two young cousins to help her in the care and entertainment of her party, hoped for fine weather.

From this party of pleasure Angela must of course be debarred, unless she yielded; and her sister was sent to reason with her, but this had no better effect than usual. Robina was a thoroughly good industrious girl, who neither read the papers nor listened to controversy; she cared most for heresies as possible subjects for her examinations in Church history, and had worked problems

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innumerable out of Colenso. So all she gained was a scolding for consenting to the latitudinarianism that caused correctly-done sums to make sixteen reapers tardier than twelve; and the assurance that no allurement, no imprisonment, should make the young martyr consent to truckle to a heretic. Angela looked exactly like Clement as she spoke, except for an odd twinkle in her eye, as if she were quizzing herself.

Robina knew herself to be too much wanted to give up the expedition, and was sent for by Marilda in time to assist in giving the five children the good dinner that was an essential part of the programme, and which reminded Robin of Mr. Audley's picnic. One little boy, however, seemed bewildered and frightened by the good things, and more inclined to cry than to eat; but he would not hear of being left behind, though, when arrived at the Gardens, he could give but feeble interest even to the bears, and soon fretted and flagged so much that Marilda thankfully accepted Robin's offer of taking him home in a cab, and waiting for her till her rounds with the other children should be finished.

It turned out that he had had a headache and a 'bone in his throat' all the morning, but had kept them a secret of misplaced fortitude; and when Robina had taken him home, wrapped up in her cloak, trembling, shivering, and moaning, she found the mother with the yearling child much in the same condition on her lap; and she was rendering kindly help in putting them to bed (for of course the nurse had a holiday), when the father came home, driven in by a sore throat and headache of his own, and forced to pronounce, as best he could, that they were in for an attack of scarlatina.

Here was a predicament! Robina had never had the fever, nor had any of her home brothers and sisters in any unimpeachable manner. She could not stay where she was, and what would either the school or Mrs. Underwood do with her? After such consideration as the little boy allowed her to give, she wrote a note of warning to Marilda, to be handed to her at the door, and another to be sent on to Miss Fennimore. The note was handed to the frightened hurried maid, and duly given. There was a moment's pause, and then the children were left in the carriage, and Marilda walked into the house. Then there took place what could only be described as a scrimmage. Marilda was deter-

mined on carrying all the four home with her, out of the way of the infection, but the mother was persuaded that they must have it already, and would not part with them. If they were ill in another house she would not be able to go to them, and the thought distracted her. The father was appealed to, and between the same dread of separation and scruples about carrying infection farther, he gave sentence the same way, and Marilda was most unwillingly defeated.

She could only take away Robina; and Robina submitted pretty quietly to her decision that her quarantine must be spent at Kensington Palace Gardens. In the first place, Marilda protested that she had had 'it;' and though 'it' turned out only to have been a rash, and it was nearly certain that Mrs. Underwood would be in despair, yet Robin really knew not where else to go, and Marilda was quite as old as the constituted authorities at home. All Robin could insist on was on remaining in the carriage till Mrs. Underwood had heard the state of the case; but considering the rule that Marilda exercised, this precaution was of little use. In five minutes she was called upstairs, a note was sent to Brompton, and she had to make up her mind to a full fortnight of quarantine—and what was worse, of lack of appliances for preparing for the Cambridge examination, her great subject of ambition.

Neither Mrs. Underwood nor Marilda could suppose that it was not a treat and consolation to a schoolgirl to get a holiday; they were as kind as possible, but oh! the dullness of the place! It was much more dull than in Cherry's visits, for she had her own study and her own purpose, and Alda and Edgar enlivened the house; but now Marilda had no pursuits save business and charity, and was out many hours of the day, there was hardly a book to be found, and Mrs. Underwood expected her to sit in the drawing-room and do fancy-work. Meantime she was losing precious time, her chances of marks and prizes at Brompton were vanishing, to say nothing of her preparation for the Cambridge examination, on which her whole start in life might depend.

The doctor's family were all very ill; but she could not think nearly so much about them as of the music she tried to practise, and the equations she set herself, while she reckoned the extra

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work by which she could make up for lost time. Alas! on the very last day of this weary fortnight, conscience constrained her to mention an ominous harshness of throat; and by the evening she was wishing for nothing but that Wilmet were not in Egypt.

However, Marilda proved herself far superior as a nurse to what she was as a companion. She would not be kept out of her cousin's room, and with Cherry's old friend, Mrs. Stokes, took such good and enlightened care, that the infection did not spread, and Robina, though ill enough to be tolerably franked for life, was in due time recovering so favourably as to be very miserable and wretched about everything, from the Cambridge examination to her own ingratitude. She never had felt so like Cherry in her life.

It was hard to say which was worst, her banishment from school or from home, or the doleful idea presented to her by that kind promise of carrying her to be aired at Brighton for six weeks! It was the loss of the whole term, and all the prizes she had set her heart upon, nor was there any one to sympathise with her, as she turned her head away and hoped no one would find out the tears in her eyes.

It was just as it had been with Lance, she thought; prevented from sharing in the competition that might have won him success in life. And how sweetly and brightly Lance had borne it; but then he had never reckoned on the success she had hoped for, and besides, her nature had not the surface *insouciance* that had helped him. She had more industry, more ambition, more fixity of purpose, and the disappointment was proportionably severer.

Poor child! she lay on the sofa, as Mrs. Underwood supposed, fast asleep, but really trying to work out in her brain puzzling questions, why it was good to be disappointed when one does one's best, why the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, trying to accept her failure as wholesome mortification to ambition, recalling 'Under Wode under Rode;' but rebelliously feeling that this did not comfort her greatly in the very unnecessary picture her fancy proceeded to draw of herself, with attainments fit for nothing but a nursery governess or school drudge, or a companion to some one duller still than Mrs. Underwood, magnanimously releasing William Harewood from all ties to so inferior

a being, and proceeding to die of a broken heart, and to shed a few tears over her own grave; or maybe the still more melancholy conviction, that there were no ties at all that he would or ought to remember.

A postman's knock made her start, and Mrs. Underwood lament that she had been awakened. Presently she was sitting up, receiving a long, narrow, green, thin letter, at which she looked with exultation and delight all over the visage lately so doleful. 'O Mrs. Underwood, it is from John himself—dear John!' was the cry, as her eyes lighted on the address; and her pleasure amounted to rapture as she read the closely-written sheets, in that clear strong neat handwriting that had hitherto always been Wilmet's monopoly.

Alexandria, March 20th.

MY DEAR ROBINA,

I hope this may find you as it leaves me at present, a thankful convalescent, and able to think of undertaking a journey with more motive force in your own person than I can yet boast. My good little French doctor has unlimited faith in the healing virtues of the Pyrenean baths, he being Gascon born, and has even volunteered to help us on our way thither when going home for his holiday—a chance too good to be lost. Malta must be our first stage; and if, as I am told to hope, I can get my sick leave extended, after being sat upon by the doctors there, we shall go on to Bagnères, where we hope to arrive about the last week in April. We think you had better meet us there. Miss Underwood will see about arranging an escort for you; Wilmet is writing to her about it. She also desires that you will rig yourself out afresh, bringing nothing you have used while laid up; and you had better likewise provide the stock of books the Cambridge dons advise, as we shall be very quiet and stationary for some time, and I will gladly do my best to help you, unless modern lights have gone quite beyond the capacities of the R. E.

You see by my date that we have made our first move. Chenu was anxious to get us away from Rameses before the Egyptian plagues should have become rampant, and after Wilmet had found a scorpion curled amiably up on my pillow, she was ready for an immediate start. So, amid the shrieks of the Arabs and tears of the entire establishment, I was carried by Travis and Krishnu to the station, and deposited in a horse-box, that I fancy occasionally transports a harem, our host weeping and kissing Wilmet's hands to the last moment. Poor people! they treated us with uniform kindness. If you can make inquiries about the price of a dinner-service, write me the result; it is a sort of testimonial that might be convenient as well as appropriate.

Here, in this great hotel, we are no longer No. 1, but simple units, and find it so much less enlivening, and more common-place, that we even regret the nightly laughter of the hyenas. I want Wilmet to join a party who are going

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to pay their respects to the Sphinx; but she will not hear of it, even under the care of Fernan Travis, who has grown quite familiar with that venerable animal. He is an admirable squire for her (Mrs. H——, I mean, not Mrs. S——,) at the *table d'hôte* and is altogether as excellent a fellow as ever lived. I am much struck with the ripening he has undergone since we were together at Bexley, and his deeply conscientious views of his very trying and difficult position. He means to see us off for Malta, and then to make his way to Jerusalem for Easter, for the chance that the throng may attract poor Edgar. Never was search more indefatigable. Wilmet sends her love, but does not write, as she has letters in hand to Felix and to Miss Underwood.

Hoping to see your face as round as ever before a month is over,

Your affectionate brother,

J. O. HAREWOOD.

Write to us at Malta whether you can come, and we will either write or telegraph to you when to start.

On a separate page were directions for the journey; and a cheque was enclosed, the first Robina had ever received, providing amply for journey, outfit, and books.

An hour before, the journey to Brighton had seemed a terrific fatigue. Now a journey to the Pyrenees was only delicious! Her happiness and gratitude were unspeakable. This was not banishment—this was not loss of time—this was perfection!

Wilmet's letter to Marilda, which came at the same time, was a far more anxious one. She described her husband as certainly better, but still with three unconquerable wounds, on shoulder, hip, and knee, that kept him helpless and prevented him from regaining strength. He was always a bad sailor, and she extremely dreaded the voyage; yet it was impossible to remain in the Egyptian climate, for already the heat was fearfully exhausting, and this long, cheerful, well-written letter must not deceive those at home, for it had been written in the cool of the evening, when he always revived, but for the greater part of the day he could scarcely speak or look; and she cautioned Robina against reckoning too much on the Pyrenean journey, since if the military authorities would not give John his leave without his presenting himself in England, they must try some sea-side place there. John's hopeful plans always ran on so fast whenever he was feeling a little better. However, Wilmet herself was very eager to have Robina, who she thought would be a great amusement and occupation to him, and was only puzzled about the escort, since Felix

could hardly spare the time, and Clement was in the final agony of preparing for his degree.

This however was settled by Marilda's offering her own maid, who was a practised traveller; and not long after arrived the final intimation. All had been made right at Malta; and Robina, who had by this time had leisure to change her skin, and gather her strength, was to start at once for Bagnères.

She was not allowed any parting with Angela, or any of those at home. It was safer otherwise, and not worth the risk, she was told, and there was nothing to dŏ but submit; and very much alone in the world did she feel when she stood on the deck of the Folkestone boat, with the black-silk maid as her only protector. It was a great plunge into the vast unknown for one solitary little schoolgirl!

Behold! A hand was held out to her, a merry pair of yellowish green eyes twinkled, a wide mouth smiled, a greeting was in her ears: 'That's right, Bobbie! I thought you'd be for this boat.'

'Willie! O Willie! You are crossing? How nice! But you shouldn't touch me.'

'Bosh! I had it long ago! Are you well and jolly?'

'Quite well, thank you. You are really coming?'

'Ay, I thought I'd run over to see Jack, and how Wilmet figures as a bride; and it is a good speculation to get you to do all the French.'

'If I can; but here's Marilda's maid, a perfect traveller's book of dialogues. Mrs. Purle—here is Major Harewood's brother, who is going the same way.'

A gentleman was not an unwelcome sight to Mrs. Purle, who was used to depend on couriers, and who entreated him at once to enforce attention to certain luggage about which she was distressed.

And to Robina, he was simply the most delightful sight in the world. After six weeks of the flatness and tedium of those good ladies in Kensington Palace Gardens, a little youthful brightness, fresh too from home, would have been like the pure sea wind after dull London air, even if it had not been, of all people, Willie, Willie Harewood himself, timing his journey on purpose to escort her!

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True, there were always two sets of feelings going on within her; one when she was actually concerned with or about him, when the common-place aspect overcame the remembrance of that evening by the river-side, and left only a pleasant companionship of long standing, with the freedom of family connection and acknowledged preference; the other, when he was out of sight and hearing, and was the standing romance of her life.

It was not a wholly untroubled romance, for she was not certain of her duty. Their promise had been exchanged when they were such children, that it would be ridiculous to mention it, and it might be equally absurd to dwell on it; yet her mind could not help attaching weight to it, and questioning whether her secresy might not be a fault. Yet it would be unfair, as well as absurd, to avow seriously nonsense three years old, and without any further advance on his part. Without any? That was the question that recurred over and over again to the poor little heart, whenever romance got the upper hand, the heart that *would* one moment yearn, at another fail, at another bound! It was avowed that Willie was very fond of her, and his sisters made that fondness one of their standing jokes; but when Robin remembered the enforced reticence with regard to Wilmet, that was no good sign, and she could never discover whether he remembered the sixpence they had not broken. It was no desirable state of suspense, this consequence of having innocently listened to premature playing at lovers' vows; and though good sense and modesty might mitigate the evil, that very conscientiousness gave her the more to endure.

However, the pain was all in private, and private moments were few, and encroached on by sleepiness and struggles to write letters. They went on too fast for more than fleeting views from the train; only at Paris, after the *table d'hôte* Willie was urgent for a stroll in the gas-lit streets, and on Robina's demur, appealed to Mrs. Purle's good-nature, and brought her out, tired as she was, but enjoying the delight of the two happy young things.

It was too late for sight-seeing, but little recked they; the wonder of the city, then so great and gay, was quite enough for them; the long illuminated arcades of the streets, the masses of trees in their young foliage in the Tuileries gardens, the unaccustomed sounds—thundering omnibus, rushing cabriolet, neighing, shrieking horses,

and high-pitched clamour of tongues, filled them with exhilarating amusement. Then the people! Maid-servants in quaint white caps, stately *sergents-de-ville*, soldiers marching to change guard, with clanging bands, knots of talkers gesticulating, parties sitting out on the pavement at the cafés—all was so new and queer, and it was so wonderful to be there with only Will, that Robina could hardly believe she was herself!

Above all, the shop windows! How they lingered and admired, like the frank-hearted children they were! Everything looked so enchanting on those slopes—photograph, confectionery, porcelain, millinery, or jewellery. Oh! the raree-show those trinket-shops in the Rue Rivoli were to them, as they gazed at the wonderful devices—those earrings and brooches, as flies, as beetles, as fishes, shrimps, and acrobats. At last they came on a set where the earrings represented a little silver bird hovering, and the brooch a gold wicker nest with three pearl eggs, and the same birds standing over it, and Robina's cry of admiration was instantly replied to with—

'You must have those, I vow!'

'Nonsense! they must be frightfully dear.'

'I don't care; you are the bird that must have that nest.'

'But it is earrings!'

'Well!'

'I don't wear earrings.'

'That's no reason you never should.'

'No, no; Wilmet would not like it, and Mamma never did. It is making holes in oneself to wear useless ornaments in,' said Robin, hurrying out her remonstrance without choice of words.

'And the other thing, with the two birds—is that for your nose?'

'No, a brooch.'

'You wear brooches. You have on a thing like a calf's eye.'

'My poor onyx—for shame!' said Robina, not confessing that it was her sole possession in that line.

'Then you shall have those two cockyolly birds.'

'No, indeed. It is a set, and they won't break it.'

'Then Grace shall have one bird, and Lucy the other.'

'Each one earring—you ridiculous boy!'

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'And wear them by turns! Come in, and ask the price prettily.'

'No, I sha'n't.'

'I thought you were to speak French for me?'

'Only when I approve.'

'Then here goes!'

And Robin, who was afraid to stand in the street without him, heard him asking, '*Quoi est le prix de ce nid d'avis?*'

Fortunately, or unfortunately, it was a bi-lingual shop, and the purchase was conducted in English; the brooch was separated from the earrings, the change made right, and the little box containing the treasure thrust upon Robina, who could only twit the donor with his *nid d'avis*.

'*Avis* not the French for a bird? If it is not, it ought to be. I thought one only had to speak Latin through one's nose and bite off the end.'

'General rules are dangerous of application in particular instances. There's the first hatch for you out of your nest of advice.'

'If you hatch advice for me, I'll take it.'

'That's a pretty considerable engagement!' said Robina, lightly.

'Your eggs of advice ain't rotten like some folk's.'

'They won't be pearls like these!'

'How do you know? My eyes, Bob, there goes a regular old Dominican, looking just as if he was got up for a charade. What a place this is, to be sure! and how hard to fancy that it is but a few hours from home after all!'

The gift and the few words after it had brought Robina's outer and inner worlds unusually near together; and when she opened her little box in her room, she caught herself kissing the silver birds in a strange thrill of pleasure and yet of doubt whether Wilmet would think she ought to have accepted it.

The long, long journey ended in mazy sleep through the diligence part of the transit, all in the dark, but with a dim consciousness of wheels, voices, and bumps. It seemed quite the middle of the night, and far too troublesome to move, when at length she was extracted by William rather than by her own volition, and something in a white turban appeared before her dazzled eyes in the lamplight,

as stumbling with weariness, she was supported and guided by her companion's arm, and reviving in the cool night air, heard that 'it was but a few steps, and the Mem Sahib was waiting.'

Then a great door opened, and showed a flood of light intercepted by a tall figure, and then Robina found a pair of soft arms round her, and nestling close to a well-known bosom, felt the infinite relief of being off her own mind and with her who had ever been the very core of home!

'My Robin, my Robin! Is she quite well? Oh, this is nice! And Willie—' giving her sisterly kiss. 'Yes, we had your letter, we were so glad. Mrs. Purle, how are you? thank you for bringing her! There's some tea ready—Krishnu will show you.'

And then they were in the sitting-room, with its bright lamp and blazing wood fire, and thorough English tea, and Wilmet in muslin and blue ribbons, as they had never seen her but on rare gala days.

'How's John?' began William, rather blank at missing him.

'Much better—so much better, but I told him not to think of seeing you to-night. He has been in bed more than two hours. And oh, my Bobbie, you ought to be there too!'

'Yes, she's tired to death,' said Will; 'we have been going since eight last night.'

She really was too much tired to speak or eat, and passively submitted, scarcely conscious where she was—nay, at some moments thinking herself in the old nursery in St. Oswald's Buildings, in the comfort of being undressed, cossetted, and put to bed by the hands most natural to her since infancy. After a time of weariness too great for right sleep, and of a strange confusion about confessions to Wilmet, she at length lost the feverish element of over-fatigue, and slept soundly till she opened her eyes to realise a little festooned bed in an alcove, white curtains over the windows, strange new street-cries outside, and within, her own box, a sofa, a table, a chair, and a fine clock, which could not be going, for it pointed to half-past ten!

As she was sitting up and looking in vain for some means of washing, the door gently opened, and that dear motherly face looked in. 'Awake at last, my poor little tired bird?'

'O Wilmet, is it really so late?'

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'Of course! never mind. Willie is just as bad; there are his boots outside his door still. There, drink this coffee before you dress. Yes, you want it; you could take nothing last night. Let me look at you; are you quite rested, and fit to get up?'

'Oh yes!' energetically; 'if only I saw how to wash!'

Wilmet laughed, and opened a cupboard-door, displaying the requisites, even including a tub, which she had found and purchased individually. After the ablutions she could judge of her little sister better, and thought the cheeks not greatly wanting in their roundness, or healthful freshness; but all the brown hair had been cropped, and the short wavy curls added to the childish contour. It was a prim little schoolgirl figure that stood there in a gray carmelite dress, and black silk apron.

'My dear, have not you a bow or bit of ribbon? John likes colour.'

'Only a blue ribbon for Sunday.'

In a moment Wilmet had hurried to her own room, a rose-coloured snood was round the brown hair, and a little Maltese cross hung by another pair of rosy streamers round her neck.

'And a brooch, my dear. Haven't you one—what's in this box?'

'O Wilmet, I wanted to ask you about it. Willie would buy it for me at Paris!'

'How pretty! There, that will do nicely. Are you ready? John is quite eager for you, now he is at his best.'

So Robin, who meant to have put her question in a very different form, was hurried away, *nid d'avis* and all, and the next moment found herself in the sitting-room, where on a couch near the fire, but commanding a view from the window, lay, half sitting, her new brother, holding out both hands to draw her to receive his kiss of welcome. 'Well, Robin, quite recruited after the scarlet enemy? So you were dead beat yesterday!'

'O John, I did not mean to be so late!'

'You are beforehand with that lazy brother of mine, who tacked himself to your skirts. Just in time for *déjeûner*, a thing always going on here. Is the young Sahib awake, Zadok?' as the white figure with a brown face entered to lay the cloth, but it was at once followed by the young gentleman, exclaiming, 'Good

morning, Wilmet; I beg your pardon—I'd no notion of the time.' Then coming to a sudden standstill, 'Holloa, Jack!'

'Holloa, Bill,' replied John, imitating the tone, with a smile. 'How's my father?'

'As—as usual! But, Jack, old fellow, how—how small you look?' said Will, shocked and overcome into small choice of words, as he stood with a frown of dismay on his face.

'Boiled to rags, like the policeman in the Area Belle,' said John, trying to laugh him into reassurance. 'Did you expect the process to have the same effect as on a pudding?'

'But my father said he was not altered!' said William, turning to his sister-in-law.

'He has gone through a good deal since then,' said Wilmet, wistfully. 'And the sun-burning has had time to fade. If you had seen him before we came into this mountain air, you would only wonder at him now.'

'Besides,' added John, 'you are grateful to a man for looking anyhow at all when he lies like a mummy. And now he is dressed like his fellow-creatures, you compare him with them.'

'And that is only since we have been here,' said Wilmet, proudly.

'And how are they all at home, Bill? How's the mother?'

'Oh, all right; and she kindly insisted on my taking out some Liebnitz to you in case you couldn't get anything in these French places. She fairly took me in this time, and I suggested it was rather tough for you under present circumstances, but she said that couldn't be, for she got it warranted in tins at the competitive.'

'Dear mother!' said John, as they all shrieked with amusement; 'I don't think Wilmet will be at all ungrateful to her. I am afraid the commissariat is a weight on her mind. Now, what do you think of her looks?' demanded John, rather anxiously.

'Well, she is always—just Wilmet—but she is thinner, and not so pink as she used to be,' said the uncomplimentary Will.

'Of course,' said Wilmet, as John's eyes turned on her the more solicitously, 'after the heat of those last weeks in Egypt; and Malta was almost worse, except that there was not the constant warfare with the flies that just kept one alive.'

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'It is very warm here,' said Robina, who had left London in an east wind.

'We find it cold up here in the mountains,' said Wilmet, who wore a velvet jacket and thick glossy striped blue and brown silk. 'Dr. Chenu warned us to prepare.'

'Yes,' said John, 'so I sent her out at Marseilles to fit herself out, and what does she come home with but one lugubrious black silk, which she tried to persuade me was the correct thing!'

'And then,' said Wilmet, 'the next thing I found was his bed spread all over with patterns, and it was all I could do not to have enough to clothe all Bexley. I was obliged to get a new box as it is, and luggage is frightfully expensive on these French lines.'

Willie and Robin, though both in some awe of Wilmet, could not help smiling at a speech so exactly like herself, as to remind them of Lance's mischievous averment that she must have married John because it was so much cheaper than sending any one out.

Those four happy tongues, how much they had to tell and to ask, about the two journeys and the two homes, all mixed up together, Bill's tidings being the most recent, and all that was known by letter becoming much more real and interesting by word of mouth.

Cherry? Yes, Cherry was very well, and had no end of a picture for the exhibition, of the maiden spinning for her lover's ransom—she had studied the maiden from one of Ernest Lamb's sisters, but she had put in exactly her own eyes, poor Cherry! There was a picture of Stella and Theodore upstairs for Wilmet. Lance had played his violin to keep Theodore happy while sitting. Oh, and had they heard that Lance had really been asked to take the organist's place? The former one had sent in his resignation, and after the half-year that Lance and the choir had worked together, there was a general desire that he should take the post. Mr. Bevan had even written to request it, at £50 a year instead of £70.

'What a shame!' broke out Wilmet. 'I hope Felix did not consent! I had much rather he was not paid at all.'

'That was what Lance wanted, of course,' said Robina; 'he wished to give his music freely, as he does not give up the business.'

'But Felix said he had no desire to give either £20 or £70 a year to my Lady, and that he did not accept her as the Church,' said Will; 'and Miles—old Miles was more rabid than ever he was at the Zoraya; and Lance was in a state bordering on distraction for fear it should go off altogether, and he should undergo torture from a fifty-pounder every Sunday of his life, but my Lady gave in; and Lance reconciles his conscience to the lucre of gain by getting a lesson from Miles once a week, and raising the pay of the biggest of those interminable little Lightfoots.'

'George, the intelligent one, that Cherry used to have up to teach,' interposed Robin, 'so that there's another in the shop to make up for any time Lance spends away from it. And when Fernan's new organ comes, whenever it is finished, it will be such a delight.'

'I hate to see him all the same,' muttered Will, with a frown; but the observation was unheeded, as Robina eagerly told how Theodore had one day gone in with his brothers to the choir practice, where he had been in such a state of bliss, and kept his *lieder ohne worter* so true that they had taken him regularly first thither and then to church, where he accompanied like a little musical instrument, and at last Mr. Flowerdew could not resist enrolling him in the choir, where, seated in front of Felix, and with 'one of the interminable Lightfoots' as guardian by his side, he was safe from molestation from any teasing freak of the other boys, and however much he might comprehend, there was no doubt that his felicity was perfect.

'It has really altered him,' said Will. 'I did not know him when I saw him in his surplice; and indeed he seems to have got a stimulus altogether, between that and Scamp.'

'Scamp!'

'What, they've not ventured to tell you that they've set up a dog!' and Bill and Bobbie both fell into convulsions, in which the Major joined more moderately, at his lady's demure face of astonishment.

'I suppose it was forgotten, when all the wedding letters were being written,' said Robina, rather guiltily.

'And when the mice no longer expected the cat,' said John.

'No, indeed it wasn't that!' pleaded Robina. 'Lance couldn't help it.'

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'It was a votive offering,' said Will. 'Lance has never ceased to be little Dick Graeme's demi-god ever since he licked him within an inch of his life for bolting Shapcote's plums. You know those dogs of Mr. Graeme's, Jack—beautiful black retrievers with tan legs and muzzles. One belonged to Dick, and no sooner has she a litter of puppies than he must bring up one for Lance, without a hint to him or any one else, till one day he coolly marched in with his dog at his heels.'

'His father was driving in,' said Robin, 'and had no notion the boy had not settled it all. We were just sitting down to dinner when the bell rang, and there was a wonderful floundering on the stairs, and in tumbled Master Dick with this great black beast padding and sprawling after him. Then, while Cherry stood clutching Lord Gerald in one hand and the back of her chair in the other, much as if it had been a wolf, we heard the pleasing intelligence; "He is for you, Underwood; he is Sal's finest pup, and I brought him up on purpose for you."'

'But Lance was not forced to keep him.'

'We could not turn him out neck and crop; and you can imagine the rapture of Angel and Bear, and Lance wished it so much! Even Cherry did not like to vex the boy, and when she began to talk of Felix and the yard, I thought how it would end. But when she said it would frighten Theodore into fits, the next thing we saw was the two rolling on the floor together, Tedo's arms round the dog, and Scamp licking his face all over, and all that satiny puppy hair on the long ears mixed up with Baby's flax. Cherry made a sketch on the spot, and there was no notion of sending him away after that. I don't know whether Tedo cannot do without Stella better than without Scamp, for they seem to understand one another better, and he is not afraid to go into the garden alone with Scamp, though he never would with Stella. It is quite new life to him.'

'As good a thing as could have been devised for him,' said John.

'Poor dear Tedo! yes, I am glad for his sake,' said Wilmet; only I hope they don't have him in the house.'

'Don't they,' said Willie, mischievously; 'didn't I nearly break my neck over the black back of him last Monday!'

'But Lance always combs him,' eagerly interposed Robina.

'Yes, Lance is as dainty about brushing and curry-combing him as he is over his own lark's crest when the ladies are coming for their magazines. Oh, Scamp is a great institution; he walks Cherry out every day, and even Felix can't resist if he makes a set at him.'

'Capital! What, not reconciled yet, Wilmet?'

'Not to having him in the house. I am thinking of Mrs. Froggatt's carpet.'

'Ours, you mean,' said Robin; 'besides, it is drugget.'

'And past praying for,' wickedly added Bill, 'since Bernard and I made a general average of the inkstand and Cherry's painting things at one swoop.'

'Abdicated sovereigns should close their ears,' said John. 'No doubt Constantius' doings much disturbed Diocletian over his cabbages.'

'I hope I was not such a tyrant,' said Wilmet; who, though used to raillery from her brothers, had yet to learn to take it from her husband.

'At least I hope you have retired on a cabbage, *mon chou*,' he said.

She smiled, but turned the subject by explaining that their excellent doctor had not only secured these comfortable rooms on the ground floor till the season should be advanced enough to remove to Barèges, but had recommended them to a *confrère*, and had found, what John added was more difficult to get than the savant, a pony and a wheeled chair, in which he was going out at two o'clock. 'And it is past twelve now,' said Wilmet; 'and you ought to be resting.'

'I'll go and look about, and come back in time to put you in your chair, Jack,' said William. 'Come along, Robin.'

'If you are not tired, Robin,' said Wilmet, 'you had better go out. We can only keep along the road; and John ought to get some sleep before he goes out.'

'The cabbage is well drilled, you see,' said John; but he really did look weary, and Robina was glad enough of the positive command.

Her sister had clearly no notion but of turning the children out

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to play whenever they were in the way; and for the present that was quite enough to send her down, forgetting everything but the charm of the walk and the companionship.

The fresh sunny spring-tide and mountain air would have been exhilaration and ecstasy in themselves, such as she had never known, even if there had been nothing to see, and no one she cared for at her side. And now the ravine, the pine-clad slopes, the scattered cottages, the rocks, the foliage, the blossoming trees, the picturesque figures, above all, the veritable mountain summits, still glorified by their winter snows, cutting the clear blue sky, filled her with a sense of beauty and wonder, enlarging her whole spirit with a new incomprehensible sensation; and William was altogether lifted out of the hair-brained rattle-pate. His frank-hearted nature had no corner for the affectation of sneering at his own loftiest emotions. It was his first mountain, and he was perfectly overcome by it; he raised his hat with an instinct of reverence, and the tears stood in his eyes as he kept silence at first, and then murmured, 'One seems nearer the Great White Throne!'

'I never guessed it was—oh—that there was such a soul in it!' responded Robina, in low awe-struck accents, as if in a church.

'No words ever gave one a moment's sense of it,' he answered; and then they began revelling in individual admiration, climbing and wandering in oblivion of all but the light and shade, the shimmering torrent and sheer rock, the cloud-like hills and deep clefts, till far on the road below they spied a queer high-wheeled pony-chair, a lady in a broad-leafed flat-crowned hat walking beside it, and the Hindoo's unmistakable scarlet and white in attendance.

'Bless me!' cried Will, leaping up, 'didn't I mean to have carried poor Jack to his chair! Time is nothing in these places!'

'Can we get down to them?'

'Of course!' Charge, Chester, charge! Give me your hand, and I'll get you down. I say, Robina,' in a lower, graver tone, 'I'm glad we've had this sight together! We'll never forget it!'

Whatever sentiment might be conveyed in these words ended in as English a view-halloo as ever startled the Pyrenees, causing the party below to look up and wave gestures deprecatory of the

headlong descent, which, nevertheless, was effected without the fracture of limbs, though Robin arrived breathless, and panting enough by no means to disdain a seat by John's side. He was looking as happy as a king, in the enjoyment of the mountain air and scenery after his long confinement on the parching Egyptian sands; but it was silent delight, and when Robina had recovered the physical agitation of her descent, she had time to feel the heart-swelling at those words, and the afterthought whether it was a stolen pleasure unless Wilmet fully knew how sweet it was to be sent out with Will.

But speaking to Wilmet was no easy matter. She was engrossed with her husband, and never willingly quitted him for a moment, thinking of nothing but as it regarded him, and viewing his brother and her sister more as means for his entertainment than in their substantial aspect. She did indeed follow Robin to her room that evening, to satisfy herself about the child's health; but just as the desperate struggle to begin on this most awkward of subjects was being made, she [fancied] she heard John's call, and was gone.

Next morning, not only were the two sent out together while the doctor made his call, but William communicated to her the verses that he had sat up late and risen early to relieve his mind of, beginning with—

'Can we ever forget this day?'

To be sure it was all mountain, and would have suited Lance equally well with herself. It was shown to John as a 'March Hare' contribution, and was destined to the Pursuivant; [but] did it not begin with *we*, and had she not had the first-fruits? The consciousness grew more precious, the conscientiousness more distressed, till it drove her, in her truth and honesty, to the desperate measure of so decidedly begging for a private interview, that Wilmet came at once, supposing her unwell.

'Oh no, no, but—but I wanted to make sure of its being right. All this about Willie.'

'About Willie? He is in no scrape, I hope?'

'Oh no; only I could not be comfortable without your knowing. Those verses, and—'

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'You little goose! How red you have turned! I didn't think you could be so silly.'

'It is not silliness,' exclaimed Robina, hotly; 'he said it.'

'My dear! he must know better. What and when?'

'Long ago. That evening at Bexley, just before Lance went to Vale Leston.'

Wilmet fairly burst out laughing. 'My dear child, how can you bring me here to listen to such nonsense? That sort of children's foolishness is silly enough at the time, but to dwell on it nearly four years after is too absurd.'

'I thought it might be play then,' said Robin, 'and everybody would have laughed if I had told; but it never will quite go out of my head, and now and then he says or does something that makes me think he has not forgotten either, and I thought I ought to tell you.' She spoke low and fast, with averted crimson face.

'You are a good little girl, Bobbie,' said her sister kindly, from an immense matronly elevation; 'but it is a pity anything so foolish and mischievous was ever said to you, and you ought never to have thought of it again. You should have left the boy if he would talk such nonsense.'

'I couldn't. Lance said we must not leave you alone,' murmured Robin.

Wilmet gave her little clear laugh. 'I'm very much obliged to Lance,' she said; 'but I am sorry Willie was inspired with a spirit of imitation.' Then, as the mirror betrayed an unconvinced look, 'Has he said anything to you since?'

'I—I can't tell—you might not call it anything. Only that brooch! O Wilmet, you aren't going to be angry with him—he never said anything direct.'

'I shall say nothing to him without far more reason; I never saw any. At home he talks to Cherry.'

'Yes, but—' she was ashamed to say 'he likes me best,' and it turned into 'Everybody does.'

Which Wilmet could not gainsay; and she went on: 'As to the verses, you have sense to see they mean nothing. Willie likes you, of course, and we are all brothers and sisters now; but as for any more, it is the merest absurdity to think of it, and though you mean to be good, my dear little sister, this is just working up a

mountain out of nothing. There can't be a more unlucky propensity than fancying everybody is paying you attention, especially if you are not particularly pretty, and have to be a governess, and take care of yourself.'

'I know I'm not pretty,' said Robin, rather proudly; 'and I never shall expect any one to pay attention to me;' and as Wilmet's smile denoted incredulity after this specimen, *this* is quite different from anyone else.'

'I should hope so,' said the elder sister. 'There now, Robin, you have done quite right to tell me; and now we'll think no more about it, but go on as usual.'

With this Robina had to be content; and if the incredulity was mortifying, at any rate liberty was sweet, and there was a precious underlying conviction that there was something that, if Wilmet would not see, it was not her fault. Conscience was free to enjoy the most brilliant spring her life had known. Throughout the fortnight of William's stay they were out together nearly all day, sometimes climbing near home, sometimes joining expeditions of English visitors, always sympathising in seriousness or sportiveness, and ever ready to fulfil the sisterly part of beast of burden towards his belongings when he wanted to climb any specially inaccessible place, or smoke with the friends he picked up. She always viewed that fortnight as the most exquisite of her whole life!

There was no sentiment in their last walk; for a brother and sister, who were always in the habit of fastening themselves on every one who was seen going out, stuck to them to their own door; but when Will took possession of two water-colour sketches he had begged from Robina, and announced his intention of framing and hanging them in his rooms, to call up before him what without them would never be forgotten, they won for their artist a thrill of delight such as none of Geraldine's far superior performances had ever obtained for her.

Robin had no one talent in any remarkable degree; her drawing was exact and tasteful, but without genius; none of the Underwood sisters, except Angela, had much voice, and her musical powers were only cultivated at the expense of much diligence; but her general ability, clear-headedness, and intelligence were excellent; and John surprised his wife by observing that he

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thought she resembled Felix the most of them all, both in countenance and character. Robin's—the round ruddy face of the family—like Felix's defined delicately moulded features and fair colouring! John smiled; he never took the trouble to defend an opinion that Wilmet thought unreasonable, but he contented himself with saying, 'There was a good deal of stuff in the Robin.'

She did not flag when her holiday was over; indeed, there was a quiet purpose in her soul that made her dutiful industry doubly hopeful and pleasant. She had a good master. John's nature was hard-working, and the invigoration of cooler air made want of employment irksome enough to give him great satisfaction in the acquisition of a well-grounded intelligent girl pupil to whom his aid was of real value. Their lessons and their subjects multiplied as his strength increased, and though they had plenty of fun and nonsense over them, Robina soon felt herself making such progress as far more than compensated for the two months she had so much regretted. Wilmet, telling them that some day Robin would know how pleasant it was to have nothing to do with teaching, sat by, stitching at a set of shirts for Clement. It was her ambition, as a parting gift, to provide each brother with a stock; she had made those for Felix and Theodore by John's bedside at Rameses, and to be busy with the 'white seam,' and watch John eager and interested, and daily looking less languid and pinched, was entire happiness to her The walks and drives became longer, and the neighbour brother and sister complained that Miss Underwood could never be had, and was always absorbed by her hard task-master, whom on her side she thought a far more entertaining companion than they would ever be.

The move to the mountain nest at Barèges was made, but the scheme made in the warmth of their hearts in the spring, of William's spending the long vacation there, was not fulfilled. Two objections stood in the way; first his reading for honours, secondly the cost. He could not afford another trip out of the proceeds of his scholarship, and the Major's means were not so large as not to be seriously affected by such an illness; while as Her Majesty's service had not required his proximity to the engine, he could not obtain compensation for his accident. When Wilmet had come to the understanding of the finances she was to administer,

she was startled at the free and open hand which might suit a well-endowed bachelor officer on Indian pay, but would soon drain the resources of a man—very possibly invalided for life, and with a penniless wife. Robin would hardly have had that wonderful cheque, if in Malta her sister had been altogether informed of the balance at John's bankers; and when she was consulted on the possibility of giving Bill a run, her reply was the more conclusive, because, little importance as she attached to Robina's confession, she preferred keeping the youth at a safe distance. Neither examination would fare the better for mutual distractions on Pyrenean crags, and both together they would be far less companionable to John than either separately.

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Beginning wedded life in prostrate helplessness, John had been as entirely thought for, managed for, and 'done for,' as Theodore himself, during these earlier months; and when he had a will of his own, it was treated with indulgence as a sick man's fancy, and yielded to or not according to his wife's judgment; but as time went on, there was sometimes a twinkle of amusement on his eye-lashes when he submitted, or withdrew an opinion rather than exert himself for controversy.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

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A BOOTLESS BENE.

'"What is good for a bootless bene?"
She answered, "Endless sorrow."'

Wordsworth.

GERALDINE was yet to discover how peaceful and happy was her life. For a year and a half, the words at the head of our chapter —whatever they may mean—had been running in her head. That 'bootless bene' was a thing of sudden stabs and longing heartaches; but Edgar had not been a sufficiently permanent inhabitant to be daily missed, as Wilmet was. He had been a crowning ornament of the fabric of the house, not a stone whose loss made a gap, but rather an ever bright, enlivening, exciting possibility in her life, whose criticism and approval had led her on to art, and trained her talent and taste. She never worked at a drawing without an inward moan, and would almost have lost

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heart, save that he and the clearance of his name were still her object; but for reliance, support, and fellow-feeling, she had more in the remaining brothers than he could ever have given her. Felix and Lance were precious companions, and Wilmet's departure had left her no time for drooping. Housekeeping began by being a grievous responsibility. Cherry could not bargain like Wilmet, nor go down into the kitchen and toss up something dainty out of mere scraps for her brothers' supper; and when she heard that Zadok Krishnu excelled in curry and coffee, she could only lift up her hands and sigh on the waste of good gifts of cookery upon one Major! Martha was a good faithful servant, but odds and ends did not go so far as they used to do; and Cherry never could, and never did, reduce her bills to the original standard, though she brought them on Saturday nights with such misery and humiliation that Felix was forced to laugh at her, and represent that their pinch of poverty was over, and excessive frugality no longer necessary. His position was now what Mr. Froggatt's had been, and his means, with Lance's payment for board, were quite sufficient to bear the difference, even without Cherry's own, which fully covered the diminution through her want of time and of notability. Waste there was not, profusion there was not; but a certain ease there was, so soon as Cherry had learnt, as Lance said, not to believe they should be in the County Court because they had spent a shilling instead of elevenpence-three-farthings. She felt too that home was comfortable to the others. The anxious stinting, though at times needful, had, as Felix hinted to her, been good for no one. Though praiseworthy and self-denying *when* it was needful, the habit had become cramping to Wilmet herself, and to all the brothers it had been an irritation, endured by some with forbearance, but certainly prejudicial to others.

Nobody was afraid of Cherry; but since all had outgrown the bear-garden age, a sympathetic government was best. *Berserkarwuth* might require King Stork's 'Now, boys;' but when the ruler was a lady, and a lame lady, chivalry might be trusted even in unruly Bernard, who had come to an age when freedom was better for him than strictness.

So had the world gone till the autumn, when Major and

Mrs. Harewood had to retreat from their mountain abode, but did not venture on wintering in England. They had made up their minds to winter at Biarritz. John would have preferred Pau, but Wilmet set her face against it, dwelling upon the benefits of sea air; and he yielded, but he would not be baulked of a day's halt there. It was a place he had always wished to see; and he would not defraud Robin of the castle of the Foix, and of the tortoise-shell cradle of *le Grand Monarque.*

He could walk now, but only with a stick, and stooping and halting a good deal. His obstinate hip was still troublesome, and his recovery had been retarded by painful methods of preventing contraction. Nor was it yet certain whether he would ever be fit to return to his corps; and though he moved about the house, and discarded invalid habits, he was still so anxious a charge, that Wilmet was quite justified in her vexation at the charms of the old castle at Pau, where he *would* walk and stand about, admiring and discussing history and architecture with Robina and a clever French priest, lionising like themselves. She did catch her sister, and severely forbid her to make a remark that could protract the survey; but the wicked priest was infinitely worse, and beguiled them into places where the ordinary guide would never have thought of taking them; nor was she certain that her provoking John did not perceive and rather enjoy her agony.

At last she got him safe to the hotel, and into the tiny bedroom opening out of their sitting-room.

'It is much quieter there,' she said, returning. 'I have given him the *Times*, and I hope he will have a couple of hours' rest before the *table d'hôte.*'

'Then, Wilmet, would you come with me? I made out the street, and it is very near,' said Robin.

'What street?'

'Alice Knevett's—Madame Tanneguy. O Wilmet,' as she saw her countenance, 'you know Cherry promised the aunts that we would see about her if we went to Pau.'

'Cherry had no right to make such a promise, and I do not mean to be bound by it. Madame Tanneguy does not deserve notice, especially from us! I should have thought you had had enough of her.'

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'But should not I be unforgiving to remember that?'

'It is not a matter of forgiveness, my dear. Her marriage was the best thing that could have happened to us. I am absolutely obliged to her for it; but that does not make her behaviour any better.'

'No; but suppose she was in distress?'

'No reason to suppose any such thing! The man was well to do; and of course she is leading that gay life the *bourgeoisie* do here—at the theatre or out on the *place* all the evening—nothing fit for us to associate with.'

'I don't want to associate, and I only think it right to find out.'

'What does Robin want to find out?' said John, helping himself forward with the table; some defender for Jeanne d'Albrêt, whom we have heard so run down to-day?'

'O John! why aren't you lying down?'

'Because I have no taste for being condemned to solitary confinement as a punishment for being beguiled by that Jesuit—not even in disguise. I'm going to write to my father. Aren't you going out again?'

'No,' said Wilmet.

'I thought I heard Robin wanting to find out some one for Cherry. These doors aren't adapted for secrets. What was it, Bobbie?'

'I did not mean to trouble you about it, John,' said Wilmet. 'Do you remember about that unfortunate affair of Alice Knevett?'

'Was it to her that your brother Edgar was attached?'

'Yes. Remember, it was a clandestine affair; and these children were made to serve as tools—that is, Angela was; and though Robina refused, she was involved in the scrape, and suffered so much for it that I should not have thought she would have wished to run after her again.'

'Then she [illegible] a Frenchman, did she not?' interposed John.

[illegible] to give Edgar up, and giving us all an [illegible] annoyance, she suddenly threw him over [illegible] away with this Frenchman from Jersey.

Yet here are the Miss Pearsons expecting us to call on her, Cherry undertaking that we shall, and this child expecting me to go and do so!'

'Do you know anything about the Frenchman?'

'A sort of commercial traveller, I believe.'

'Agent for a wine merchant,' said Robina. 'Major Knevett said there was nothing against his character. Miss Pearson sent the address; it is in the street at right angles with this, about eight doors off.'

'Well,' said John, 'I do not see how you can refuse to satisfy the Miss Pearsons about her.'

'If she were in a right frame of mind she would write to them. While she treats them with such neglect, I do not see why I should encourage her.'

'Cherry said they thought she was ashamed to begin,' said Robina. 'Miss Pearson wrote severely at first, and now wants very much to make a beginning, and to be sure that Alice is not in distress.'

'I think it ought to be done,' said John; 'it is so near, that you can walk there at once with Robina, and at least inquire at the door. I do not see how you can refuse Miss Pearson.'

Nobody had spoken to Wilmet with authority since her fifteenth year, and she did not recognise the sound.

'I do not choose to notice a person who has behaved like that,' she said; 'Miss Pearson has no right to ask it. Take off your things, Robina; I am going to pack for to-morrow.'

There was no temper in her tone, only the calm reasonable determination that had governed her household and ruled her scholars; and she walked into the other room and shut the door, as on a concluded affair.

John looked round. Robina was standing by the table, wiping away a few tears.

'I do not know what to do, John,' she said. 'I wrote to Cherry that we were coming here, and would do this. May I have Zadok to walk with me?'

'Your sister is quite right,' said John. 'I am the fit person to go. How far did you say it was?'

'Eight doors, I counted.'

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exclaimed, 'You must stay here. You are not fit for the *table d'hôte*.'

'None of us are,' he answered, in a low, grave tone that startled her; and she then saw that Robina was looking dreadfully white and overcome, and trembling violently.

As the girl met her eye, all was forgotten but the old motherly relation; and there was a rush to hide her face on her, and a convulsive sobbing of, 'O Wilmet! Wilmet!'

'Lay her down! I will fetch something,' said John, moving towards the other room. 'She has held up with all her might.'

'But oh, what is it? That wretched Alice! Bobbie, my dear child, lie down! Don't try to keep it in; cry—no, you can't speak. O John! What is it?—Yes, that's right,' as he brought what was needed from the medical resources always at hand for himself; 'only tell me the worst.'

With his eyes on the measure-glass, and his steady hand dropping the stimulant, he said, in an under-tone, 'A duel! The husband was killed; but it was hardly Edgar's fault.'

Wilmet, with Robina almost fainting on the sofa, was wholly occupied in administering the drops, and bathing the flushed face; and the success of her efforts was shown by another cry of 'O Wilmet!' and then a passion of weeping that shook her whole frame violently.

'That is best,' said John. 'She kept it in bravely.' And as the great *table d'hôte* bell clanged, he went to the door and spoke to Zadok.

As he returned, Robina bounded up, nervously exclaiming, 'O John, lie down, do; you are done up!'

But when strength was needed, he found it. 'Not now, thank you, my dear. I have told Zadok to bring us some dinner. That will make less disturbance. We will get ready, and after that we shall be better able to talk.'

Overwhelmed and crushed, the sisters did just as they were told; but Wilmet turned once, and said as if out of a dream, 'Is there anything to be done? Is he here?'

'Oh no! It was months ago—before I saw him. It was forced on him. You shall hear all presently, dearest.'

The gentle kindness restored her, or rather drove everything out of her thoughts but his flushed, weary, affectionate face, and

heavy painful tread; and when he grasped her arm to be helped into the sitting-room, and sank with a sigh into his chair, half the world might have killed the other half, so long as he was neither ill nor angry with her.

'Will you see for that poor child?' he said, as Zadok came up with the three couverts; 'she needs restoration as much as any one.'

Robina had washed her tear-stained face, but was only brought to the table as an act of obedience; and all through the meal John was coercing her into swallowing soup and wine, and Wilmet was watching that he did not neglect his own injunctions. Then disposing of Zadok with some orders about coffee, he lay down on the sofa, but by a sort of tacit motion invited Wilmet to give him one hand to play with, and stroke his hair with the other—his old solace at Rameses—and oh! how much it made up for to her! Robina was now quite restored, and longing to relieve her soul, and the narration chiefly fell to her.

'We soon found the house—one of those immense tall old ones—and we rang, and asked whether Madame Tanneguy lived there. "*O oui*," said they, "*au quatrième*." We thought that rather odd; and John asked again if she were English, and the *concierge* said, "Yes, assuredly;" and as someone else came just then, we asked no more questions, only climbed up, up those dreadful stairs, so dirty and so steep. I wanted John to sit down and wait for me, but he would not hear of it.'

Wilmet looked at him with moist eyes, and pressed his hand. 'I was accountable for the child,' he said, smiling. 'Besides, there was nothing to sit upon.'

'At last,' continued Robin, 'we did get to the *quatrième*, and rang; and we heard a little trot-trotting, and the door was opened by a queer little French child, that turned and ran away, calling out, "*Maman, Maman!*" and as we went in—O Wilmet! there rose up, with a little baby in her arms, poor Alice, all in black, with a great flowing white veil, like the widow at Bagnères. She knew me directly, and I believe we both gave a little scream.'

'That you did,' murmured Major Harewood.

'And she said, "You—you! what do you come here for?" I did not know what to say, but I got out something about the aunts;

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and she answered, "Then you do not know, or you could never have broken in on me and my poor orphans!" Really I thought she was mad with grief, and said the aunts would have sent all the more; but she burst out, "No! no! not his sister—his—the murderer of my husband!" and she began to cry. I only thought still she was mad, but—O John, what was it? Didn't you think so?'

'No, I saw that was not the case; but I thought she took you for someone else, and began to explain; and I think the curiosity of making out who I was, and how we came there, did more to bring her round than anything else.'

'But how could this dreadful thing have been?' asked Wilmet. 'You said it once: but it cannot really be true!'

'Too true, my dear,' said John, 'but with much extenuation. It was last September. He really was with those National Minstrels.'

'Ah!'

'But not by name in the programme,' said Robina. 'She went to the theatre with her husband, and there were Hungarian and German songs; but then when the English ballad began—the Red Cross Knight—the first notes overcame her; she had a *saisissement*, screamed, and almost fainted.'

'Just like her! exclaimed Wilmet. 'Then it was all owing to that?'

'I fear so. Edgar looked up, and when he saw her, he broke down. He began again, and got through the rest of his part; but in the meantime M. Tanneguy had been discovering that he was not Alice's first love.'

'Not by ever so many,' muttered Wilmet. 'And of course she shuffled and shifted off the blame to Edgar.'

'If so, she has suffered for it,' said John, with gentle repressiveness.

'And,' continued Robina, 'whatever she could say only enraged him more; he took her home, then waited for Edgar at the door of the theatre, demanded an explanation, and challenged him. They fought outside the town, and M. Tanneguy was wounded; but they did not think it so bad; and, like a brave Frenchman, he kept up to his own door, so that Edgar might get safe away. On the third

day he grew worse, and died! O Wilmet! who could have thought it? How will Felix bear it?'

'Remember,' said John, 'that this was fastened on your brother. I don't, of course, look on it as anything but a crime, but it should not be exaggerated. To be insulted and called to account by a fiery Gascon, when you believe yourself the injured party, cannot be easily bearable; besides, Edgar had had a foreign training, not so alien to duelling as ours, and his associates would expect it of him. For the rest, I think he must have won his enemy's heart, for the poor lady said much of her husband's acknowledgment of his generosity, and desire for his escape. I am sure he might well, if he did half as much for him as he did for me.'

'And he had done this when he touched you,' said Wilmet, shuddering.

'Or I should not be here,' said John. 'My dear,' and he held both her hands, 'I wish I could make you look on it in a different light. It was not an assassination. To have refused the challenge would have required a sort of resolution that few men are capable of; above all, when all his surroundings would have expected it of him.'

'What surroundings?' replied Wilmet. 'No wonder he could not bear to face your father and me! Poor Edgar! wandering about like Cain! And he was such a dear little boy! Papa used to call him his little King Oberon! Oh! I am glad Papa and Mamma don't know it.' She slipped down on her knees by John's side, hid her face in his pillow, and cried, but softly and gently now.

'I don't think it can be less bad to Felix and Cherry,' said Robina, sadly. 'How can we write to them?'

'We had better not do so till I have learnt more,' said John; 'I shall go to the *bureau de police* to morrow, and make inquiries, and try to see poor Tanneguy's employer, M. Aimery, who seems to have been the only friend that poor young thing has had.'

'Why did she not write?' asked Wilmet.

'M. Aimery did write to her father,' said Robina, 'but he has left Jersey, and the letter was returned; and as to the aunts, you know Miss Pearson did write sharply once, and Alice always took her strictness for unkindness, and never knew how fond of her the

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aunts were. Indeed, I fancy she has been too ill and inert to do more than go on from day to day.'

'Has she anything to live on, poor child?'

'Her husband had a small interest in the business, and M. Aimery pays her the proceeds every month—a hundred francs.'

'A hundred francs! four pounds three and fourpence for herself and two children!'

'She had to move up from the nice apartments below to this dismal *quatrième*, only one room, and very little in it; and then she was ill for a long time, and the baby was born; and that took up all the ready money there was left. She has been thinking whether she could get any daily-governess work to do among the English; but then, how can she leave the children?'

'Poor thing!' said Wilmet, 'I must go and see her to-morrow.'

'Do,' said her husband affectionately. 'Considering all things, we had better remain here a few days, had we not?'

'Certainly. I will speak about the rooms. Of course we must do our best for her and those poor children. I hope they are girls.'

'No,' said Robin, 'boys—Gustave and Achille. Gustave looks preternaturally wise and solemn, with his black eyes and bullet head; but when his mother cried, he went into such an agony, that John had to shew him his watch, and give him his stick to ride on, before we could hear ourselves speak. O John, what work you have done to day!'

'And you too, Bobbie,' said Wilmet kindly, 'you had better go to bed as soon as you have had your coffee.'

Her head was aching enough to make her glad to take the advice; and when she was gone, John lay still, too weary, and yet too comfortable, for the exertion of going to bed; and he was not far from sleep when Wilmet came back from giving her sister the tender care that the shock demanded.

Bitterness and resistance had long been swept away by those terrible tidings; but Wilmet could not forget that she had offended, and gathering herself into a great effort, she stood by the sofa, dignified, but rather constrained, and said, 'I am very sorry about this afternoon, John.'

'You were quite right,' said John, sleepily; it was not a business for women alone.'

'That was not what I meant,' she answered. 'I ought not to have made that flat refusal. I did not recollect.'

John roused himself a little, to say, 'I suppose when two people come together who have grown up separately, their judgments must sometimes differ, and there is not always time to adjust them.' These last words were very sleepy again.

'No, I see I ought to have submitted; but I had no notion you would go; I behaved very ill to you, and you did it to punish me.'

'Not exactly,' he said, stirred up at those words. 'It would have been kinder to have told, but you had spoken plainly, and there seemed no time—nor occasion—for—further—Jeanne d'Albrêt—'

Which last words were sufficient testimony of the power of Morpheus. After all, he was inflicting, though he did not know it, a severe punishment. Wilmet was not a self-tormentor like Cherry; but she did not like to have her little mutiny passed over without a reconciliation, and to see him so perfectly unruffled by what had made all the depths of her heart turbid. And when he had 'fallen asleep in her very face,' she had the strongest possible temptation, if not to pursue the argument, at least to demand if he meant to sleep there all night, and rout him into going at once to undress; and when her real goodness and affection would not permit this, to beguile the time with the piece of intricate Pyrenean knitting, which had been the solace of his active nature, when he was good for nothing else. Though she had taught him to knit, those essential differences in the strength and manipulation of male and female fingers, made him particularly dislike to have rows interpolated by either of the ladies, and this she always so far resented, that it would have been uncommonly agreeable in her present mood to have gone on with the work. To abstain was all the harder to a person of her instincts, because no other occupation could be attained without opening a door, and breaking his slumbers; and though Wilmet had plenty to think of, the deprivation of mechanical employment for her fingers was trying enough to take away serenity or connection from her thoughts. Instead of any sort of meditation on the terrible tidings of the day, her mind *would* vibrate between desire to take up the knitting and resolution to let him sleep till eleven.

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Perhaps in truth, nothing in her whole life was so difficult to Wilmet Harewood, or of so much service to her, than using such abstinence.

The shock and horror of the tidings when they reached Bexley may well be believed. John, after full enquiry, had written both to Felix and to the Miss Pearsons. Geraldine had perhaps never before believed that Edgar was lost to her, and the blow of regarding him as a murderer had such an effect upon her, that an illness was the consequence, in which Felix had to call in Sister Constance's aid to supplement little Stella's, and conquer the almost exaggerated feeling that for a time threatened nervous fever.

Sometimes, however, a lesser worry becomes a remedy for the effects of a greater, and Cherry's recovery was certainly not retarded by a certain dismay at learning that the forgiving aunts had offered a home to their errant niece and her little ones. No one could grudge them the asylum, but it roused Cherry from bewailing the crime of the one brother to a far more commonplace anxiety about the other—a counter-irritant that so restored her health and spirits, that Sister Constance left her to such peace as it allowed her to enjoy. Felix had settled down so quietly—he seemed so entirely to have got over it, that it was hard to have all stirred up and the lady brought back again, freed in so dreadful a manner. No woman can ever estimate beforehand the effect that one of her own sex will produce on a man, however sensible. Her opinion is no gauge for his; and she labours under the further disadvantage that her better judgment is sure to be pitied, if not as feminine spite, at least as feminine incapability of candour; and Sister Constance advised Cherry to abstain from expressing the faintest regret. The good old aunts religiously preserved the secret of the mode of Tanneguy's death; but no one who knew the niece could doubt that the whole story would be at the mercy of whoever chose to cultivate her confidence.

Her arrival was notified by the sending in of a parcel from the travellers, containing Wilmet's sets of shirts for Lance and Bernard, and two beautiful shawls in Pyrenean knitting, one for Cherry and one for Mr. Harewood. Felix said very little, but his complexion was still as tell-tale as a girl's. He was restless till Geraldine had

called, though he feared to ask her to do so. She was not indeed uneasy about his actions; but only lest his affections should be so far out of his power as to render him unhappy and open the old wound.

Her visit went off better than she expected. She was greatly touched by Alice's delicate appearance and altered looks, and was favourably impressed by her subdued affectionate manner, and her fervent gratitude to the Harewoods, little guessing that it was to Robina that she owed it all. There was so much to hear about the Major's degree of recovery, his kindness, Wilmet's splendid beauty, and the sensation it excited, and all their arrangements for the winter, that Cherry went home in a far more ordinary mood than she could have thought possible.

For some time there was no meeting with Felix. Cherry even began to wish it was over, and off his mind as well as her own.

It came about at last suddenly. Felix opened the house door exactly as Alice was passing; they greeted one another, and shook hands. She had her eldest boy with her; he was leading Theodore, and Scamp, who was at their heels, instantly thrust his tan nose into little Gustave's face, so terrifying the child, that Felix was lifting him in his arms out of the dog's way, when he was startled by a yell from Theodore. The boy had an animal's instinctive jealousy. He had never seen any child but himself and Stella caressed by his brother; and the sight brought on one of the accesses of passion which had begun to seize him since his will and his strength had become somewhat more developed. Felix had no choice but peremptorily to snatch him indoors, leaving Madame Tanneguy and her child, who were both very much frightened, to Lance.

No more effective separation could have been devised, for Alice could not but retain a great horror of that 'dreadful boy,' who, though much smaller than Stella, and with little force in his soft aimless fingers, was still nearly eleven years old, and twice as big as her tiny brown elf. If they had been shut up together, Gustave would have mastered him in a minute; but she of course viewed him as a formidable being; and on the other hand, his face changed at the word 'little boy,' and his blue eyes grew fixed and round, and his soft murmuring to an angry inarticulate jabber, if he

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did but catch a sight of the little French boy from the window. Geraldine was just beginning to feel that the preventive had come in a curious form, between the two unconscious creatures, when Madame Tanneguy received a remittance from M. Aimery, and could not understand how to get it cashed. So just at the old twilight hour of her former visits she was shown into the drawing-room, and a message was presently sent to beg Mr. Underwood to come up when he was at leisure.

When he came, Geraldine was struck with the peculiar gentleness of his manner. It was gentle to all women and children, but to Madame Tanneguy it had a sort of tender reverence that gave its exceeding kindness a marked character, and was so unlike the good-natured elder-brotherly raillery that used to veil his youthful adoration, that Alice scandalised Cherry by exclaiming, 'How altered Mr. Underwood is! Grown so grave, I should not have known him!' As if anyone would not be grave when approaching the widow made by his brother.

He had minutely fulfilled the little service for her, and no doubt the reverential tone gratified her, for thenceforth she was always coming for the help and counsel that she never failed to find. 'Nobody could advise like Mr. Underwood,' she said; and it was amazing how much she found to consult him about—not only her French investments, but her arrangements with her aunts, her correspondence, and at last whether she ought to bring up Gustave and Achille as Roman Catholics. It so much annoyed him to detect any pleasantry on his submission to her behests, that Cherry and Lance scarce durst glance their half-amused annoyance to one another; and Angel and Bear never fell into a worse scrape in their lives than when they concocted a forgery with the tidings that Madame Tanneguy presented her compliments to Mr. Underwood, and was grieved to inform him that Gustave had scratched Achille's nose. Would he give her his much esteemed advice whether to apply court-plaster or gold-beater's skin?

Felix severely told Angela that to make a jest of Madame Tanneguy's forlorn condition betokened heartlessness, and added to Bernard that all the assistance that he or any of the brothers could afford was no more than her due, and could never atone for the past. Bernard was really awed, and after sulking for the rest

of the day, suddenly veered into a certain private adoration of the lady, who by this time, with returning health, was resuming her vivacity. She had discarded her floating crape, and her pretty little head shone in its native glossy jet, while she smiled, chattered, and except that she was a devoted mother, and did her duty conscientiously as an assistant in the school, was the old Alice to all intents and purposes. Nor was it her fault if the original Felix did not likewise revive; she tried many a little art to beguile him into the playful terms of their former intercourse, but he never relaxed that reserved, compassionate gentleness, nor allowed himself to forget that his brother had first loved and then made her a widow. Cherry could have jumped for joy that first time she detected, and saw that Lance did, a shadow of a shade of impatience at those exactions; and finally she settled into the trust that propinquity was the best disenchantment, and that though there was still some romance, it was about the Alice of old visions, not the live Madame Tanneguy, whose obedient slave he would indeed always be, but merely as Edgar's brother, and who was fast, by force of boring and of levity, dispersing all the remaining glamour.

Cherry had her own anxiety, for an inspection by Wilmet was approaching, and very suddenly. At the end of the winter, at Biarritz, the travellers' plans had been deranged by an offer of an appointment at Woolwich, which hurried them home in the end of February instead of the beginning of May, as they had intended, and allowed them only to give one clear day to each of their families. To that day Cherry looked forward with some dread. Certainly the household was not precisely the Babel that Wilmet had found on her former return, but a formidable consciousness of shortcomings that would not bear inquisition beset her, and she had such a frantic bout of tidying, that Lance found her hopping about half dead with fatigue, and Stella nearly smothered with dust; and begging an afternoon's remission from business, he became the merriest and most helpful of housemaids till the operation was accomplished.

After all, the anxiety proved to have been a little superfluous. Winds howled all night, and Major Harewood's well-known discomfort at sea made the arrival dubious till about three o'clock,

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when, in pouring rain, a fly deposited the voyagers, shaken, battered, jaded, with a prolonged and wretched passage, and each too anxious that the other should rest, to be good for anything but wan smiles and affectionate greetings. They had eaten or tried to eat at Southampton, and nothing could be done with them but to shut them into Mr. Froggatt's state bed-chamber and leave them, promising to be better company in the evening.

Then there was time for Robina, who meanwhile had done little but run about in their service, select and open the boxes and bags containing what was wanted, and introduce the Hindoo, who was put under charge of a young Lightfoot.

Then Lance and Robin had time to stand up in the drawing-room gazing at one another after this thirteen months' interval. Lance held up his hands and pretended to fall back in dismay: 'Robin-a-Bobbin grown into a young lady! Ah!'

'And what's this?' as she flew at him to pinch the thick brown down upon his lip. 'What kind of crop is this?' And they took one of their old tumbling waltzes round the room together, as if to shake themselves into one, while, with the hand that each kept loose, Robin continued to snatch at the new decoration, and Lance to defend and smoothe it down.

'Ay,' said Felix (who tolerated it by a certain effort of philosophy, and the humbling consciousness of being an old Philistine), 'he is cherishing it for the Handel festival. He wants to be taken for a German.'

'O Lance, are you to go to the Handel festival?'

'Yes, Miles has got me a place in the chorus—jolly, isn't it, of the old fellow? I say, Robin, we must get you up there.'

'I—oh! I shall be at Woolwich then, I suppose. Do you know, Cherry, I must only stay till Monday? Those two aren't in the least fit to get into their house at Woolwich without help, and John has begged me—'

'I suppose you must,' said Cherry. 'After all these good accounts, this is disappointing; but how could you all cross on such a night?'

'Why, Wilmet never minded the sea before, and John had made up his mind soldier-fashion, and thought nothing was to be gained by waiting. And when Wilmet had to succumb she would

not believe it, and was so disgusted at herself, and so miserable about him, that it did her all the more harm.'

'And you!'

'Oh, I was quite well; but it was horrid enough any way—and poor John had gone from the first to lie quite flat in the gentlemen's cabin, where I could not get at him.'

'Before I go, what do you think of him?' asked Felix. 'One can't judge of his looks to-day.'

'Oh! he calls himself sound—the wounds are all healed at last, but he gets a great deal of bad pain still, either rheumatic or neuralgic; he says it comes from the strain on his constitution, and will take no advice about it till he can see Dr. Manby. Then he's so cripply that he could not have gone on in the service if he were not a field-officer. He says he is quite up to it, but we think it a great experiment. Oh! Felix—Lance—don't go—there can't be anybody this wet afternoon!'

'Yes,' said Felix, 'this is just the time that all the old gentlemen who get tired of their own fire-sides, and all the professionals that can't take their walk, feel inclined to come and prose at "Froggatt's."—But they won't want you, Lance; I'll send if there's anything for you to do.—Good-bye, Robin Redbreast, you do look uncommonly nice!' and he took her round cheeks between his hands, and held up her face to kiss each of them, with mouth and brow, individually and gravely.

'She's the Robin still,' said Cherry, 'only just a little polished up.'

'Developing,' said Lance, stalking round her, and speaking his words deliberately; 'developing—into—the—bloom—of—sweet—seventeen—and of—'

'Not beauty!' broke in Robina. 'I would not be as pretty as Wilmet for two-pence.'

'Not for a major?' suggested Lance.

'He didn't marry her for her beauty,' vehemently responded Robina, 'but for her—her niceness. Her beauty has been always in her way, and a nuisance to her, and—'

'Sour grapes!' quoth Lance.

'Not a bit. It would be a worse hindrance in my branch of the profession.'

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Lance did not answer in jest this time; he looked at the bright pleasant-faced girl in her maidenly bloom and fresh stylish dress, and said, 'What a horrid pity it is! she looks ten times more of a lady than ninety-nine out of a hundred of 'em—and there she's to go and grind and be ground just for a governess.'

'Not a bit more of a pity than that—I'll not say that you should be a printer, Lance, but than that anybody should be anything. I learnt my Catechism, you see, to learn and labour to get my *own* living.'

'So you sent Madame Tanneguy home to prevent you from getting into Wilmet's shoes at Miss Pearson's?'

'I should hope I was fit for something more than that!'

'Well done, Bob!'

'I didn't mean—' said Robina, rather distressed, 'but you see I have had a much better education than ever Wilmet could get, and have gone on longer with it; and I can go in for things that girls here would not care to learn; so, as I am not wanted to keep house with Wilmet, it would be just waste for me to come and do like her—poked up in this corner.'

'Ah! you've had a taste of the world,' said Lance, speaking in jest; but Robina, recollecting how he had crushed any ambition of his own, and who *did* veritably feel that though home was home, Bexley was dull and narrow, turned round with moist eyes.

'O Lance, I hope it is not that! You know I have been brought up to go out, and it seems my work and duty; but I think it is a great deal more honourable to stay here because one is wanted.'

'Because one can't help it,' said Lance, pulling her hair and smiling. 'Have you learnt to make speeches in France, Bob?'

'No. But indeed, Lance, I do want to know if you do never get tired of things now?'

'Oh! I've no right; I'm not one of the highly educated ones!' said Lance, in a spirit of teazing.

'Now, Lance, don't punish me, when I really want to know.'

'Taking into consideration the awful slowness and stodginess of the place, and the contempt of one's highly educated brothers and sisters,' said Lance, slowly, but with a twinkle in his eye that somehow made up for the words, 'one *does* drag on life pretty

well, by the help of Pur and the organ. The new one is coming by next summer, if there's any faith or conscience in the builder, which I believe there is not.'

'And,' she added, coming near and speaking low, 'did I not hear that there had been a letter from Ferdinand?'

Cherry looked for it. 'Felix took it down to answer,' she said, 'but it was from Sydney. He had seen Mr. Allen.'

'Oh!'

'Yes. He tracked those National Minstrels all over India, Bombay, Calcutta, all manners of places—good faithful fellow—and at last he found they had gone to Sydney, and there, actually, was Mr. Allen, settled down as a music-master, making—I don't know what in a week.'

'But—'

'But there had been a great quarrel, and the concern had broken up; and he did not in the least know where poor Edgar was gone,' sighed Cherry. 'Robin, did you hear what name he sung under at Alexandria?'

'No, Ferdinand only told Wilmet that his name was not in the programme.'

'That good Cacique!' broke out Lance; 'he is about the slowest-witted fellow that walks the earth. I believe he would never believe it was he if he saw anything less than Thomas Edgar Underwood in extra type. If he only would have sent me, I'll be bound I'd have run Edgar down in no time, instead of being always three months behind him, and now off the scent.'

'No, but is he?'

'No, he has not given it up,' said Cherry. 'Mr. Allen did not know whether they were gone to Melbourne or Adelaide, and he meant to try both; and to go and see Fulbert and Mr. Audley.'

'One of them will stumble on him while Fernan is staring about with his nose in the air,' said Lance.

'I am afraid he will only avoid them,' said Cherry sadly.

'And another certainty is that he will have taken some fresh alias,' said Lance, 'while the Cacique is still hunting for Tom Wood. I bet on Fulbert's finding him!'

'Has he parted from those Hungarians too?'

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'Ay, there's the question! Should you like a prima-donna sister-in-law, Robbie?'

'No, no, no—don't, Lance,' cried Cherry; 'Mr. Allen said Mademoiselle Zoraya had—the horrid woman—thought much more of Edgar since—' she could only pause, 'but he was far too sharp to be drawn in.'

'That I believe,' said Lance. 'Never fear, Cherry, we shall have him some of these days, with a long beard, a longer fortune, and the longest story—ah!' with a long sigh, 'if I wasn't an organist, wouldn't I like to be a scamp!' The offensiveness of which word was concealed by a sudden embrace of the Scamp dog, who was made to stand on his hind legs, with his feet in Robina's hands, to display his beautiful topaz eyes; and in the midst of the exhibition the door opened, and John came slowly in, leaning on his stout stick.

'O John, I am glad! are you rested? Haven't you been asleep?'

'No; I think Wilmet will sleep if she is alone, so I am going to waste no more time. Thank you,' as Robina put the cushion as he liked it, and looked into his face with inquiry as she detected the well-known lines that showed it was pain that made sleep hopeless. He smiled and gave a little nod, by which she understood that she was to keep her discovery to herself, and that it was not so severe but that he hoped to amuse it away; and he began at once laughing with Geraldine.

'Well, Cherry, you see I've a rival to Lord Gerald.'

'I began to think I ought to offer him to you, though it would go to my heart.'

'As if I would be put off with a slender little wand like that,' said John. 'That's what I call a stick.'

'That's what I call a club,' retorted Cherry. 'I should want somebody else to carry me if I took such a monster;' and they proceeded to a sort of tilt between their two supporters.

'I won't have disrespect to my steadfast friend! She's made of olive tree; her name is Olivia; and I believe Wilmet is jealous of her.'

'Indeed she is,' said Robin. 'When you go out all by yourself, and come in hardly able to speak. That's what he went and did at Paris.'

'When one has got a wife and a sister, one breaks loose sometimes. Here, you little Star, come and speak to me! Why, you were a blackberry-gathering baby when I saw you last! Let me look at you now. How old are you?'

'Eleven and a quarter,' breathed a little voice, as he gathered two tiny hands into his, and a pair of porcelain blue eyes glanced up for a moment out of the most dainty little oval chiselled face and pink-and-white complexion, set in soft brown hair.

'And can eleven and a quarter hatch an egg from the Palais Royal?' Not from Bill's *nid d'avis*, but of a bird of larger growth,' as Stella, with a half-breathed 'thank you' rosiness spreading over her face, and lips raised for a kiss, beheld a beautiful blue egg, containing implements of needlework.

John tried to talk to her over it, but could get nothing but monosyllables, and blushes, and smiles, till he released her, and she flew off, 'To shew her egg to Theodore,' said Cherry. There's some baking going on; and he never stirs from the kitchen while he can handle the dough.'

What a lovely little fairy it is!' said John; 'but is it wound up to say nothing but yes or no?'

'She is awfully shy,' said Lance. 'Bill can't get as much out of her as you have done.'

'She has not spoken a word since I have been in the room,' added Robin.

'She is a strangely silent child,' said Cherry. 'Sometimes I think living so much with Theodore helps to make her so. She is quick at her lessons, and is a perfect little book of reference; and will talk to me gravely when we are alone; but it never seems to come into her head to chatter. I'm sure Lance and Robin have talked more nonsense in this hour than she has in six months.'

'I've a longing to hear Stella perpetrate a little nonsense,' said Lance. 'When Angel and Bear are at home, and there is a good gabble, there sits the child, her bright eyes smiling and gleaming, without a word.'

A knock at the door. 'Mr. Lancelot, there's the Centry carriage in the High Street.'

'There, you see what it is to be the lady's man!' said Lance, laughing and running down.

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'The Centry carriage means your cousin no more,' said John.

'No; she has let Centry to an old general with a large family. She said she knew nothing about country poor, and hated county people; and her mother likes nothing really but Brighton. I think she is quite right,' said Cherry.

'What sort of people are they?'

'Oh! they do very well for the parish; but of course are nothing to us. The General proses over the papers to Felix sometimes; and the daughters have the loveliest eyes in the world.'

'That's Lance,' said Robina, laughing. 'Is he as tender-hearted as ever?'

'Oh yes; or more so; but as long as the ladies *all* have the most beautiful faces that ever were seen, and his attentions are confined to putting attractive advertisements into their parcels, I don't mind.'

'Lance is the most altered of you all,' said John.

'Dear Lance,' said Cherry, 'he has got back a great deal of his sunshine—quite enough to be very delightful to us, though I doubt whether he is always as bright to himself. There is a certain *sehnsucht* in the pieces of music he goes on improvising, that sometimes makes me anxious.'

'You mean whether he has got into the right line,' said John.

'It's no use thinking about that; Felix could not do without him; and he is fit for nothing else now,' said Cherry. 'I fancy when the new organ comes, he will have a love in that and be happy.'

John was thoroughly one of themselves, more eager about Bexley affairs than his wife, though she was thoroughly her affectionate self when she joined them in the evening. She was too much tired, and too glad to see their faces, to do more than repose in the sight; and it was kinder to sing than to talk to either traveller. Even the next day, when the ravages of the storm had been repaired, she had too much on her own hands to have leisure to set Cherry to-rights; and if she perceived any disuse of her pet economies, she acquiesced as if it were to be quite expected, and no more worth a protest than matters at the Bailey, whither she was going the next day. To be sure, there was a kind of implied expectation that she would some day arrive for a general rectification

of what could just be tolerated under present circumstances; but this was not a very pressing alarm.

The visit was over, the new home at Woolwich begun; and before many weeks were over, it welcomed what father and aunt united in calling a magnificent boy. Felix went with Mr. Harewood to the christening, and found his sister a different creature, lovelier than he ever remembered her. It seemed as if her happiness would have been almost too great for this earth if John had only been as strong and well as he tried to appear. But, after all, Felix really believed Wilmet would have been lost without some one to nurse besides Christopher Underwood, dutifully named after his two grandfathers.

Alda had actually come down for the day. It was the first time the sisters had met since the funeral at Centry Park, and it had cost her an effort, for her third daughter was but ten days older than Wilmet's baby; and she could not withold a slight plaint at the inequalities of fate, in bestowing only girls where they were less welcome, while the sex of Wilmet's magnificent boy could be of no possible consequence—a remark which so exasperated not only the mother, but the father, as greatly to amuse Felix.

Lady Vanderkist looked very thin and worn, as if much less recovered than Wilmet, who had a beautiful fresh bloom, and was vigorous while Alda was languid; but the brother and sister gathered that her difficulties in coming down were far less caused by health than by disregard to her private wishes and plans. Wilmet regretted that she had not brought her little Mary; and she said she had hoped to do so, but had found she could not have the horses, and did not like to take her in a cab. She warmly invited Wilmet to town, but to Marilda's house, not her own, except for mornings; and she apologized with real vexation for not being able to offer Felix a bed, Adrian expected someone that evening.

She was, of course, beautifully dressed; but Wilmet, in a delicate pale-grey silk and Parisian rose-bud bonnet, was not the foil she used to be; and the two sisters were still a very striking pair, though no one would have guessed them to be twins, so worn did Alda look. She was much kinder to Robina, too, and absolutely eager to hear of every one at home.

But what struck Felix most was this. He had business in

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London, and went back with her late in the afternoon. At the last moment, Wilmet, wanting to cloak her sister, transferred her baby to his father, who, as he held him, smiled to him with one of those little gestures of tenderness, that express so very much because they are involuntary and unconscious; and after the brother and sister were seated in the fly, when they looked back with a last wave of the hand, Robina alone answered it; the papa and mamma were wholly occupied in handing back their treasure with a kiss on either side. Alda went on looking out, and presently Felix saw her handkerchief stealing up to her eyes. Perhaps she thought herself composed, for she turned round and said, with an effort at a smile, 'That's what it is to have a boy! If Adrian had ever looked like that!'

Felix charitably refrained from expressing his accordance with her former sentiment, that it would have been all the same with a girl; and indeed Alda had miscalculated her fortitude, for speaking brought a flood of tears. Felix durst not look at her, and doubted whether to let himself be conscious, but said at last, 'Caresses are no test. Many men do not care for very young children.'

She shook her head; but as they arrived at the station she forced back her tears, bit her lip, and drew forward her spangled veil; Felix brought her a glass of water, and she walked along the platform with him, holding his arm with a clasp that reminded him of the day he had taken her home from Thomas Underwood's, but not a word did she say in the train.

There was no carriage to meet her, and Felix could not resolve not to see her home.

'Oh! thank you,' she said, more warmly than perhaps she had ever thanked him before. 'I've always said one must come to you for chivalry. But it is terribly out of the way; you will be late for the dinner in Palace Gardens.'

'They must forgive me,' he said; 'and I should like to see the last of you.' And as he sat by her in the hansom, he tried to give her a smile, all affection and no pity.

'I wish there was time for you to go in. I want you to see little Mary;' then presently, after an effort, 'You'll not speak of this, Felix. I'm not strong yet; and I suppose daughters always are a disappointment where there is a title.'

Felix supposed it too, and very kindly.

'Is there any chance of your coming to town again, soon?' she asked, 'I am always at home and alone before three.'

'I do not think I shall—no—Lance is going up to the Handel festival, and we cannot be away together.'

'Little Lance! I've not seen him since he used to have his head-aches. But it is no use to think of it, we shall not be in town by that time, the house is so dreadfully expensive. We shall not have one another year. One gets sick of so much going out, and with all these little girls it is time to begin to be prudent.'

Felix had seen enough of Sir Adrian Vanderkist's name on the turf to think the sentence ominous; not that he was afraid of any great crash, but expensive tastes did not accord with estates entailed and the annual birth of a daughter; and he was greatly touched by Alda's collapse of self-importance.

He was late, and Marilda forgave him easily, but Mrs. Underwood was cross. No doubt she had fumed about poor relations having no right to keep her waiting; and though there was something indefinable about Felix that hindered her from manifesting this cause of displeasure, his having been engaged in Alda's service did not pacify her. She considered Lady Vanderkist as extremely ungrateful for not having transported Marilda into those upper circles to which marriage had introduced her, without taking into account that the obstacle lay, not with Sir Adrian, who was ready enough to pay court to riches, but with Marilda herself. That young lady was forming her own way in the world. She had had enough of the Golden Venus line while, for her father's sake, she submitted to it; and she did not choose to force herself into fashionable circles. Country poor and the Lady Bountiful life, that her mother would have accepted as 'comifo,' were distasteful to her; but she had thrown her business abilities into the service of London charities, and was there becoming every year a more considerable power. Her business premises were in St. Matthew's district; and this made her regard herself as a parishioner, and undertake no small amount of service, of descriptions better known to the clergy-house than to her mother, who set down to the accounts of the office many an hour spent in Whittingtonian schools and alleys. At any rate, Marilda had become a much more

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agreeable person, with more aplomb, more ease, and decidedly less touch of vulgarity, since she had made her standfast, ceased to be dragged at the wheels of the car of fashion, and become the managing spirit of Kedge and Underwood, besides all that St. Matthew's knew of.

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THE VICAR OF VALE LESTON.

'Cushions and cloth an' books, takin' the old church right roun,'
Surplice, shovel, and broom, they would na ha' fetch'd half-a-crown,
Commandments to boot. They was the only good lookin' things
Wi' yellow cherubs between 'em, and nout but heads and wings.
Parson Myles was a hunter, and could gallop through a prayer,
Right straight ahead over anything, an' stop him who dare.'

Rev. W. Heygate.

THERE was to be a meeting about the paving of the town: Mr. Underwood, though only twenty-eight, was a town-councillor, and decidedly an influence in himself, as well as through the 'Pursuivant.' He had so worked his way up, that his fellow-citizens accepted him as one of themselves; and his birth and breeding gave him a power which they felt without in the least acknowledging. Besides, his conscientious journalising made him always thoroughly get up his subjects; and he threw himself into the merits and history of asphalt and flag-stones with that 'all his might' with which he did whatsoever his hand found to do.

He was busy on an article to prepare the way for the meeting, when Lance, who had been making selections from London papers, laid the last sheet of the 'Times' on his desk, and silently pointed to the obituary:—

'On the 4th, at Torquay, aged 37, the Reverend Fulbert Bowles Underwood, Vicar of Vale Leston Abbas, only son of Fulbert Underwood, Esquire, of Vale Leston Priory.'

'I see,' quoth Felix.

Five minutes' waiting while he wrote.

'I say, does it go into Pur?'

'Certainly not. What matters it to any one here?'

That was all Lance could get out of Felix; and after a time came the second delivery of the post. All the letters lay in a heap on the office table, just when, as Lance mentally termed him, the longest-windedest, button-holderest of all the municipality walked in to bestow his opinion on the paving question upon Mr. Underwood; and Lance not only had to retreat from the important conclave, but was occupied himself by a succession of customers for a quarter of an hour after its conclusion. When he made another rush into the office, he found Felix still writing away at the paving stones, but with a good deal of red in his cheeks, and a letter lying by his side.

'Read that, Lance,' he said, 'but don't speak till this is done.'

Lance read :—

Vale Leston Priory, May 7th.

MY DEAR MR. FELIX UNDERWOOD,

I write by desire of my poor friend Mr. Underwood, to acquaint you with the death of his son, your cousin, the Vicar, at Torquay, on the 4th of this month. The melancholy event had long been anticipated, as there had been a complete break-up of constitution; and I for one never expected to see him return home alive when he went to Torquay with his wife last winter. Mr. Underwood has felt the loss deeply, though not with the same acuteness as if he had not had such long preparation, and it had not taken place at a distance. He has become much more feeble since you saw him five years ago, when certainly you left a lasting impression. He wishes you to be present at the funeral, with any of your brothers to whom it may be convenient. The time is fixed for next Friday, the 10th, at eleven o'clock. Your rooms will be ready for you on Monday; and if you will mention your train, you shall be met at Church Ewe or Ewmouth. It seems premature to mention it, but Mr. Underwood is so anxious that no time should be lost, that he desires me to intimate to you, that if you can procure immediate Ordination, he will present you to the Vicarage. I do not take this to be as simple a matter as he does, but under the circumstances, and with your studious turn, I should think it quite possible for you to be ready before the Vicarage lapses, and the poor old Squire has evidently set his heart on it, and planned it ever since he gave up hope of his son's life. Congratulations would be out of place at this moment, but I trust that the succession is now secure.

Remember me to my friend Mr. Lancelot—I trust that headaches are with him a thing of the past—and believe me,

Yours very truly,

H. STAPLES.

Lance made all manner of contortions with his visage, read and re-read, indulged in a suppressed war-dance, and finally merged all

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other sensations in an agony of impatience, as still Felix's eyes and pen continued to travel over his sheet; and not a muscle of his face moved until the last was handed to little Lightfoot, and sent off to the press.

'That's done,' then he said.

'You may well be on the board of paving-stones!' cried Lance. 'Nothing but one of them could have gone on so.'

'It had to be done.'

'I could as soon have done it as flown.'

'Not if you never let your mind loose from it. Now for the letter. Stay, we'll take it up to Cherry. I'll just say a word to Lamb.'

Felix's courtesy to his subordinates always went a great way. The noontide lull of business was beginning to set in, but Cherry and Stella looked up from their lessons in amaze as both brothers came in; and Cherry mutely clasped her hands, and with the word Edgar fluttering on her lips, but as both faces plainly indicated no, she rallied instantly, saying, 'What wonder of wonders is it?'

'Nothing very surprising,' said Felix gravely. 'It is that poor old Fulbert, at Vale Leston, has lost his son, and wants me to go to the funeral.'

'That's not all,' added Lance. 'What do you think of his wanting this here Giant to get himself ordained, and take the Vicarage on the spot?'

'Felix, you could not—not in time.'

'Nor at all. That is not to be thought of; but I shall go through London, take Clement down with me, and see if I cannot get the living for him; but let me read you the letter—I could barely glance at it.'

He read; and Cherry broke out, 'The succession secure! Does that mean to you?'

'I am heir-at-law,' said Felix quietly; 'and it was entailed on me in case his son had no children.'

'He takes it coolly, doesn't he?' said the far more elated Lance; 'but then he's had plenty of preparation.'

'You don't mean that you've known about this?'

'I knew the estate had been entailed on me to prevent this poor man from alienating it.'

'You knew, and you never told any one, and went on as usual!'

'How would you have had me go on?' he asked, with a certain provoking meekness, that sent her into a laugh, while Lance, catching Stella's wondering eyes, practically answered the question by locking her fingers in his, and whirling her round in a sort of impromptu choric dance, chanting:—

'Wrong shall be right,
And right shall be might,
When—'

('bless me, what a plague three syllables are!')

'When Felix' right and Felix' might
Shall meet upon Vale Leston height!'

'It is not a height,' interposed Felix.

'The King shall have his own again then,' amended Lance. 'No, I have it. The enchantment is over, and the Frog-prince is about to resume his proper shape!'

'Lance, considering—'

'Blunderbore, considering the extraordinary relief and disburthening of my mind, after labouring under this secret five years come August, if it were not profane, I should compare myself to Christian when the pack dropped off his back!'

'But why was it a secret?'

'For two reasons, Whiteheart,' said Felix. 'First because there was nothing to tell; and secondly, because that "nothing" might have turned several heads. Still, I believe you would have known it long ago, if I had not been ashamed after binding over Lance.'

'Please, may I understand?' entreated Stella, in rather a melancholy voice, as she found her usual mode of observation quite inadequate.

'Understand, my Star! Yes,' said Lance; 'understand that we were all of us kicked out—all of us that were there to kick, that is to say—from the jolliest place in all the world; and now things are coming right, and Felix is going to be a fine old English gentleman who had a great estate! I declare it makes me so poetical I can't get on!'

'You'd better come to me, Stella,' interposed Felix. 'Nothing is going to happen now, my dear. It is only this. The old house

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where we elder ones were born was meant to belong to my mother, but there was a flaw in the will that left it her, and so it went to the more direct heir; and my father would not go to law because he did not think it right when he could not afford it, and especially as he was a clergyman.'

'O Felix!' cried Cherry eagerly.

'Yes; I have a copy of the letter. And now, the poor old gentleman who had it has lost his son, and has sent me a kind message, as if he wished me to go back there; but that will not be in his life-time, so we need not talk about it. There is nothing to make any change now.'

'No?' asked Cherry, disappointed.

'Of course not. Expectations are not good sustenance. The reversion is possibly very distant, and there may be some mistake about it, after all.'

'Well! one ought to be prepared,' said Cherry; 'but oh! to see you at home—home—yes, Vale Leston is home! O Felix, what it will be!'

'Don't set yourself on wishing it,' said Felix anxiously. 'Remember Pur and the business are our dependence or independence, and most likely are far better and safer for us.'

'Pshoo!' shouted Lance; 'I won't have you talk book!'

'May I tell Wilmet?' entreated Cherry.

'No harm in that; meantime I must get things in train, and then walk over to explain matters to Mr. Froggatt; and as soon as I can get away to-morrow I shall go up to town, and make Clement come on with me.'

'O Fee, one moment! Are we to go into mourning?' Then, as he held up his hand, 'It means more than you think. It shows how much we hold by the connection; and if I understand you, you wish nothing so little as to have it trumpeted about that Mr. Underwood has great expectations.'

'As prudently stated as W. W. could have done it! It must turn on the degree of connection.'

'Is he as near as Tom Underwood was?'

'The same on my mother's side. Yes, put on black ribbons; but, as you say, don't trumpet the thing. Don't begin about it, but if any one asks, explain how it stands.'

The heir-expectant was gone; and Lance, after waiting to indulge in another pantomime of exultation, ran after him, humming:—

'Oh, to see him back again!'

By the middle of the next day Felix was able to leave home, after having seen the Froggatts, whom he treated with as much deference and attention as if he were still accountable to them. The reception of his communication made him glad that he had been silent when the chances were more remote, for though Mrs. Froggatt was ready to cry for gladness at the notion of his taking his own proper place as a gentleman, and had a farmer's daughter's respect for the squirearchy, her husband feared that empty anticipation would spoil Felix for a tradesman, and be injurious to the business, which he viewed with tender pride and solicitude. So he lectured on the uncertainty of prospective fortunes, and the folly of reckoning on them, till it was evident that his confidence would have been sorely shattered had the bare notion been whispered five years earlier. Indeed, his comfort seemed compromised by finding that Felix would not be the permanent property of the business, and he was almost displeased, as if he thought he had allowed it to pass into his hands on false pretences. It was vexatious and disappointing; but he had to be left to recover the first shock, which, after all, proved his love and value for the young man.

Felix did not reach Whittingtonia till late; and on inquiry at the clergy-house, heard that Mr. Underwood was not at home, but the Vicar was. To him therefore Felix went in his study, not sorry to ask his advice. Clement, who would not receive priest's orders for some weeks, was over young for the charge of an utterly neglected parish; but it was dangerous to let the presentation pass by, since only a brother could satisfactorily co-operate in dealing with the old ancestral sacrileges, in case he should ever come in for the property himself.

Mr. Fulmort never spoke while Felix told his story; and the bell for Evensong had begun by the time it closed. Then he said, "I am very glad, heartily glad. I have been watching Clement, and I see he is not tough enough yet for our work. When a young fellow, of such a length too, can't eat after any hard day's

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work, instead of being ravenous, he is sure to break down the first time he takes cold or catches an illness, and then he is done for. I should have had to drive him away elsewhere, at least for some years, poor fellow, though none has ever been more like a son to me. Yes, of course he is too young, but he is not the sort of stuff that falls into slackness, and that is more fatal than any amount of blunders and foolishness.

The last words startled Felix. He had been so anxious to place Clement at Vale Leston, that he had thought of no drawbacks till he was roused to a foreboding of that dour uncompromising rigidity, left to itself, sowing dissensions, becoming a hard master to them all—nay, not improbably alienating the old Squire, and overthrowing all their prospects! Such a future passed before Felix in his transit across the quadrangle, and was met, but not disposed of, by the sense that it was right and just that Clement should be put forward, '*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra.*' He had put Clement into his own place to console his father for his own secession to secular work; and if devotion, blamelessness, and earnestness were recommendations, they were not lacking. 'And if he do give offence, and all be left to Marilda,' thought Felix, 'let it go. It would only be for conscience sake. Poverty is better than riches! and I may have to show that I believe so. I only hope that the boy will not do the thing in some pig-headed way, in which it would be hard to back him up.'

Misgivings vanished for the time when his brother was in sight. It was not easy to make him out in the deep perspective of the choir. Felix only knew that a fair-haired head above the average line must be his; but when he came forward to the Eagle, whence he was to read the Second Lesson, and afterwards give his lecture, he was in full view. In his lankiest hobbedy-hoy days, Clement had always looked his best surpliced; and now, with the cassock beneath, the stole over one shoulder, and his black-and-white hood, his figure had a certain dignity, and his voice gave Felix a thrill. The mixture of hereditary tone and unconscious imitation were such that when he shut his eyes he could believe himself a boy at St. Oswald's, listening to his father; and even when he looked up the illusion was hardly dispelled, for the half-light brought out the similar moulding of the features, and a

nervous flush, when he began his own composition, recalled the hectic tinting. He gave a careful little discourse, evidently one of a series, and the allegory of the Wilderness life with much more depth and poetry than the elder brother had expected.

He had taken care to place himself out of direct view of the young preacher, and his appearance in the quadrangle was an immense surprise to Clement. 'Felix! you here! nothing the matter? What's that? Not poor Edgar?' as his eye fell on Felix's new hat and hat-band.

'No, no—this is for the younger Fulbert of Vale Leston. I have more to say to you.'

'Come in to supper, then. Have you seen the Vicar? Do you stay the night? That's jolly! Here, Fred, you've not seen my brother!'

Fred Somers was known to be Clement's friend. With one of the natures that prefers external to home friendship, Clement had at first bestowed his affection on poor Harry Lamb, and since upon this companion, who had been his predecessor by half a year in everything, and in whom Felix was diverted to see his complete contrast. Mr. Somers was at least five inches below Clement's six feet one and a half, and was a dark, plump, merry little man, who looked as if the Vicar never need scruple about getting any amount of work out of him; and Clement, with a hand on his shoulder, looked perfectly happy, and as if working at St. Matthew's side by side with him were all he desired. And very overgrown and boyish Clement looked too at that supper, a very merry one. There were the six clergy, fourteen choir boys, and sundry chance-helpers, mostly talking eagerly, with a good deal of laughter at old and new jokes. Felix, seated by the Vicar, thought Clement far more at his ease, more playful and familiar, than ever he had seen him at home, and infinitely less on his dignity than he ever allowed himself to be with Lance and Bernard.

After supper, the two brothers repaired to Clement's tiny private room, uncarpeted, with a table, two Windsor chairs, and a book-case; and then, when the elder had explained, the younger flatly refused to have anything to do with Vale Leston Abbas.

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'I?' he said, 'go to a fat easy-going country living when the need is so urgent here? I to stand alone when I want years of training? It would be enough to ruin me!'

'But the place, Clement. This parish will never be ill-supplied while Mr. Fulmort lives; but people have souls down in the country.'

Clement had not much feeling for souls whose bodies he had never realised; but he answered, 'Very bad for the souls to have an inexperienced priest.'

'Quite true; but observe, it is not the choice between you and such a clergyman as you would select, but between you and no one knows who—certainly a person who could not help in the complication of family and Church property, as only a brother could do.'

'That is all in the clouds,' said Clement. 'I have made up my mind to ten years' service here, and I intend to keep to it.'

'The Vicar says you have not strength for it.'

'Then I shall go on without it.'

'Till you kill yourself.'

'The best end one could come to.'

'No, not if there be a leading of Providence elsewhere.'

'I observe that Providence is generally said to lead in the direction of ease and £ s. d. No, Felix, I am much obliged, but even if this old man would appoint a vicar of decided opinions like mine, I cannot allow myself to be led aside into a path of wealth and luxury contrary to all I had marked out for myself.'

'Are people always meant to do all they have marked out for themselves?' said Felix, as he heard the frequent first person singular.

'When it is the line of self-abnegation.'

Felix could not help smiling, and muttering between his teeth, 'Is it?' Then he added, 'At any rate you will come down to the funeral and see the old place?'

'No! I will not raise false expectations to be disappointed.'

The idea of baffled expectations excited by that long white-faced lad! Even Felix was beginning to console himself, and think Clement might be doing the best for them all, when they

were summoned to the Oratory by the evening prayer-bell. As good-nights were spoken at the foot of the stairs, the Vicar asked Felix, 'Have you prevailed?'

'No, sir. Perhaps you will talk to him?'

Mr. Fulmort nodded, and Felix went to his own room. In the morning the Vicar told him that he had not made much impression, but that he had actually made it matter of obedience that Clement should go to Vale Leston with his brother, and not consider his decision as made till he had thoroughly seen the place.

And thus it was that Felix, in different company and different mood from when he had last seen his birthplace, found himself stopping at a little station called Church Ewe, about three miles short of Ewmouth; and there a smart servant came up with his finger to his cockaded hat, and took possession of the two little black bags.

'The beginning of greatness!' observed Clement, who was very benignant towards Felix's prospects, though he would accept none for himself, as they ensconced themselves in the great barouche with the pair of horses.

Felix shook his head. He wanted to hold himself as loose as possible from gazing on the place as an inheritance, at the same time as he greatly desired to see Clement smitten with it, almost as much from jealousy for the old home as with a view to the future.

Their way brought them in on the opposite side from the Ewmouth road; so that the first view was from high ground, whence the lovely encircling valley, the slopes of wood inclosing it, the purple moorland above them, the grey sheen of the river, the high-arched bridge, the noble church, and grand old ancestral-looking priory, partly veiled by fine trees, in the delicate glory of early summer, lay outstretched before them, the shimmer of the sea, and a few white sails far in the distance.

That sense of the eye satisfying the heart, and being as it were at rest and at home, which he had felt at the sight five years before, and never at any other, came over Felix; and exulting in the loveliness, he looked eagerly to see the effect on Clement, but the smooth young face was carefully guarded against relaxing, the

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light blue eye was steadily set as unmarking anything. Felix was provoked, and then wondered whether the Deacon were like the Moslem who refused to dwell at Damascus, lest he should have his Paradise only on earth. A little local information elicited nothing but civil indifferent answers, that inspired a desire to shake that inanimate figure.

Driving up through the park, beauteous with chestnut blossom, they were shown into the library; and there Mr. Staples came to them, cordially shaking hands, but, as Felix fancied, somewhat critically scanning that long straight coat with the little cross at the button-hole.

'The Squire is tolerable,' he answered to Felix's inquiry. 'I think it is coming out in gout. He will dine with you. It does him good to see people.'

'And Mrs. Underwood?'

'Came yesterday. Mother and brother here too. Ladies dine together upstairs.'

'Are you staying here?'

'No; but I am over as much as I can. The old Squire wants someone, and I don't fancy leaving him too much to Smiles—he's the curate, and has been trying to worm himself in. Will you come to your rooms? Dinner at seven.'

To Felix it was like meeting an old friend to tread the black stair, and the long panelled corridors, all windows on one side, the other hung with portraits, the Underwood red cheeks and blue eyes staring round, and coarse like Marilda. Mr. Staples popped Clement into one wainscotted room, and left him there, but shut himself in with Felix.

'So that's your clerical brother?'

'An excellent hard-working devoted fellow.'

'But very—?'

'Well, rather!'

'And it is quite out of the question for yourself?'

'Entirely so. Even if I thought it right, it could not be done.'

'I thought so, and told the Squire. Unlucky, for things are a good deal involved; and you would find the vicarage income handy, while as for this—why he is a mere boy!'

'So he feels himself. He is conscious of his want of

experience, and it would be an infinite relief to him to see it in good hands.'

'Mrs. Fulbert and her mother declare that the Squire promised poor Fulbert to give it to her brother, Harry Shaw, whom you'll see here to-night; but he swears he did no such thing; and on the whole, I think Smiles would have a better chance—he's an obsequious chap, who has been very attentive to the old man all the winter, half their spy, half his toady. However, the Squire would never let either of them have it while there's a parson left with Underwood blood in his veins!'

All the quaint old bedrooms in this passage opened one into the other, and Felix unlocked the door between himself and Clement to communicate the information received, but it apparently took no effect.

The dinner-party was dismal and incongruous enough. Obsequious was a word that exactly depicted little, sleek, low-voiced Mr. Smiles, who though presiding at one end of the table, seemed ready to emulate Baillie M'Wheeble's posture; and the rival candidate, Mr. Henry Shaw, was a red-faced, punchy man, hardly distinguishable in appearance or manner from his farmer kindred, and, as soon became apparent, with such principles as he had, diametrically opposed to those of Clement, who, with his refined countenance and form, looked as if he belonged to some other world.

Mr. Underwood was wheeled in in his chair. He was not a man to give way, but rather to try to talk sorrow down; and the curate and Mr. Staples, knowing his humour, set county politics going, and all joined with a fervour, not to say violence, that struck the brothers as unsuitable. It was more than the Squire, between deafness and the burthen of grief, could follow; he grew abstracted, and presently rousing himself, turned to Clement to ask what had just passed at the other end of the table.

'That the bribery petition will fail, sir,' repeated Clement, bending with the naturally kind and courteous manner due to age, infirmity, and sorrow, and speaking in a clear sweet modulated tone, that evidently struck the old man more than the words.

'You have the family voice,' he said, looking up at him. 'Why, you are a mere lad! You don't tell me you are in Orders?'

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'I was ordained Deacon last summer, sir,' said Clement, colouring deeply at having to say it loud enough to attract everyone's attention.

'Ah! eh! And your age?'

'Four-and-twenty last March.'

'You don't look eighteen,' said the Squire, with that still infantine face close to him, reddening most youthfully. 'Where's your curacy?'

'At St. Matthew's, Whittingtonia,' said Clement impressively, and casting his eyes round, as if, thought Felix, he were making a confession of faith and looking for persecution; but, half to the elder brother's relief, half to his diversion, they had got into a world where there was no thermometer of London churches, and no one knew what the avowal implied. Mr. Smiles asked if it were a Bethnal Green district; and Mr. Shaw observed, loud enough for the Squire to hear, that London parishes were not the places for plain straightforward men, no one was looked at who wasn't got up like a swell to please the ladies; and then they both united in rallying the youthful curate about tea-parties and pretty young ladies; but Clement was as impervious to ridicule on that score as if his head had been cowled and tonsured, and be bore it well, simply and gravely replying that he was too much occupied to go into society. He volunteered no dangerous topic, but showed much more good sense and forbearance than Felix had ventured to give him credit for in the curt answers he was compelled to make; but the old gentleman did not hear these, and began again.

'You've a sister married—eh?'

'Two,' said Clement, for Felix was too far off to be audible; and as further information was looked for, 'one to Major Harewood, and the other to Sir Adrian Vanderkist.'

If Felix did for a moment feel that it sounded better than if they had married the butcher and the baker, Mr. Shaw took care to qualify the announcement with, 'Sporting baronet, ain't he? Got three horses at Epsom, I think!'

'What's that?' demanded Mr. Underwood. 'Your sister's husband on the turf?'

'I am sorry to say he is,' said Clement gravely

'Not getting into scrapes? Any danger of his going on too fast?'

'I think not, Sir.' Felix felt he must shout, knowing well that Clement's regret was directed rather to racing in the abstract, than to any pecuniary peril, and for the first time feeling bound to defend Sir Adrian as a brother-in-law. 'He is a prudent man, and not likely to go beyond his means.'

Which was true. He was not exceeding present means. The evil was the future of the little girls, now four in number; but Clement looked reproachful at the answer he had to repeat to his neighbour, who relapsed into silence for a little while, then asked again, 'Who said one of them had married into a marching regiment?'

Mr. Staples laughed, and came to the rescue this time. 'Regiments never march but when young ladies marry into them; but it is not true in this case, Sir. Major Harewood is in the Royal Engineers, and has an appointment at Woolwich.—Didn't you tell me so?' turning to Felix. 'Have you heard anything from him of this new gun?'—which gun was safely wielded through the remainder of the meal.

After dinner, the Squire went back to his room, desiring Felix to come with him.

He looked much older than before, and made no more effort at cheeriness; as he sighed, settled himself, and signed Felix to a chair near him and his great fire.

'So!' he said. 'So things come round! Why did you not bring the nice little lad that was here before?'

'He and I cannot both leave home together,,Sir. He is my right hand in the business.'

'You've not brought him up to your business?'

'I could not help it. That sun-stroke put him back in his studies, and he could not bear to be idle.'

'You must find some gentlemanly line for him; not too old, eh? You give it up, of course, you've thought better of my proposal—eh?'

'Quite impossible, Sir, thank you,' said Felix. 'You are very kind, but I am totally unfit. My education was stopped at sixteen.'

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'Don't tell me you can't get through what Harry Shaw there did! Besides, what do we want of a scholar? I'd rather have a man of sense!'

'No Bishop would or could ordain me within the time.'

'Staples did say the Bishops had got more crotchetty now-a-days. How long would they insist on for preparation? I'd get little Smiles to hold it for the time.'

'It is impossible, Sir, thank you, in every way—even if I could think it right.'

'Right? It is not right the things should be separated. I've been crippled by it all my life, and cursed my folly in setting my face against the Church; and you'll hardly get the property in so good a condition as I did. Why, you're bookish already, and look like one of the cloth. Fit! you're fitter by a long chalk than Harry there! Come! think better of it. I'd not mind the cost if they insist on a turn at the University.'

'Thank you, Sir,' said Felix; 'but I cannot do it. It is against my conscience.' And as he saw that this was incomprehensible, he thought he had better bring forward a palpable testimony to the impracticability. 'Besides, I must go on with my work. There are too many of us for me to give over.'

'Many! The lad hasn't been fool enough to marry?'

'No, no, Sir; but there are two, a little brother and sister, at home, and two more at school, besides Geraldine and Lancelot.'

'All depending on you?'

'The four youngest entirely so; Geraldine earns a good deal with her painting, and Lance quite makes his own maintenance; but I could not leave them, nor break up the home.'

Six brothers and sisters were more than any one could adopt on the spot, and Mr. Underwood felt the cogency of the argument. 'Then you absolutely must keep up this confounded trade of yours till the breath is out of my body!'

'I hope to keep it up a long time yet, Sir,' said Felix; 'I have been very happy in it.'

'And—and—there's no other way?'

'Certainly not, Sir, thank you. All I have is embarked in it: and while things stand as they do, I should not be justified in making any change.'

Whatever Felix's kindred might think of his occupation, they were always forced to feel the dignity of his industry and independence. Here was this young man, under thirty, and looking younger than he was, talking of half-a-dozen of young brothers and sisters as a reason, not for accepting help, but for being let alone to maintain them; and actually showing a brother, a clergyman, scholar, and gentleman, visibly superior to what his kinsman had brought there to meet him. This was not a young heir to adopt, foster, and command, but a man to address upon equal terms, and Mr. Underwood put his next suggestion with less of authority. 'If it were not just absolute trade—retail, ain't it? It will be against you when you come here, you see. Could not you get out of it into Kedge and Underwood's firm? That would sound better.'

'Yes, Sir, but I could not throw over my business without a great loss; and it would be undertaking what I don't understand, instead of what I do.'

'Besides,' added the Squire, going on with his talk, 'with your expectations, family, place, and all, that girl of Tom's would jump at you!'

Felix shook his head decidedly, though unable to help a little inward laugh at this revival of Alda's old manœuvre.

'By-the-by,' continued the old gentleman, 'what's become of your brother that Tom bred up?'

'We knew of him last in Australia, Sir.'

'Next to you, is he or this tall lad you have here?'

'He is older than Clement.'

'Poor Tom made too much of him—eh? Well, young men will be young men,' said Mr. Underwood, too full of his own sorrows to think about Edgar; 'but they come round at last:' and therewith he fell into a talk about his own son, whose illness and death he proceeded to dwell upon, as he found he had a kind and attentive auditor; and this lasted till the butler came to wheel him off to his bed.

Felix and Clement paid an early visit to the church next morning, and found it in a course of being muffled in black. 'Seventy-five yards there allys was for every Underwood on 'em,' said Abednego Tripp, who had become much more shaky and

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feeble, had resigned his market-boat to Kerenhappuch's husband, and was hobbling about the church in a mixed, but on the whole a pleasant and exulting, frame of mind, by no means partaking of the intense disgust with which Clement beheld the sanctuary invaded by the paraphernalia of human woe.

Dr. May, unasked, brought Bernard over to the funeral, which was at twelve o'clock. Neither the father nor the widow attended it; but the incongruity of Edward Underwood's sons acting as chief mourners was prevented by the nearer claims of the Shaw brothers-in-law. The farmer tenants came; but the lack of neighbouring clergy and even gentry struck the brothers in contrast with the overflowing numbers who had flocked to their father's grave, so far from his ancestral home, showing how much more the man can be than the position.

Bernard was staring about him with little endeavour for appearances; and at the first moment that speech was possible, even while the hat-bands were coming off, he looked up in the face of Clement with open eyes, and said, 'My eyes! this is no end of a place! Is it what is to come to us?' Clement hushed him seriously and vigorously, but without much effect. 'Did you know 'twas like this?' he persisted, gazing round.

'I never thought about it. Hush!'

'Why, 'tis twice as jolly a house as Abbotstoke! And the woods! And the river! One might shoot every day, and fish the rest, and be always boating besides!' exclaimed Bernard, enthusiastically, but happily under his breath. 'And ain't there a hunter worth £120 here? Where is he, Clem?'

'How should I know?'

'You've been here all night and this morning, haven't you?' said Bernard, as if he had not thought even Tina capable of such indifference. 'I'll get down to the stables, and find out.'

While Clement was trying to stop him, the summons to a lugubrious luncheon did so more effectually. There Bernard had the opportunity of fraternizing with a Shaw nephew of his own age, and none of the malice of his seniors, who imparted the melancholy fact that the hunter-colt was sold, but undertook to show off the stables; but fate was too strong for Bear, he was captured by his eldest brother, and told that while Dr. May's

horse was coming round, Mr. Underwood would like to see him.

The wish was far from mutual, and Bernard was as sulky as his namesake; but sulkiness might pass on such an occasion for decorous solemnity; and Bernard was always one of the show specimens—a big, well-grown, straight-limbed boy, with a handsome Underwood face, not of the girlishly rosy tinting of his brother's, but glowing with a hardy healthy sunburnt hue, and he could not but answer with a sort of glum awe-struck civility the few questions asked him, as to his age, and where he was at school, and then whether he had ever been rabbitting.

'Only once;' and Bernard's face lost its sulkiness. 'Marilda's gone and let her shooting!'

'And you like it?'

Bernard's lips only said 'yes,' but his blue eyes danced.

'Well, some of these days, you must come over and have a day with the keeper, when your brother is settled here.'

The eager face of anticipation fell, and out came at unawares, 'But that won't be till you are dead;' and then the boy began colouring to the ears.

'No, no, I don't mean this brother; but what's his name—the young parson? When he is here, you must come over. And here—' As the Doctor came in to take leave, Bernard found in his hand 'tip' that exceeded even the great days of Ferdinand's munificence!

He sprang out to Clement, who was standing in the porch. 'Oh! I say, Clem, what a splendiferous go this is!'

Again, all he got was a scandalized hush.

'I don't mean *that*. He told me himself! I'm to come over to shoot rabbits, and all that is delicious, when you are a clergyman here! Hurrah!'

'Hold your tongue, Bernard,' said Clement, with a voice of subdued impatience, 'and don't talk nonsense.'

'But you *are* going to be a clergyman here,' persisted Bernard. 'He said so.'

'That does not make it the fact.'

'O Clem, you'd never be so viciously spiteful as not to come! Think of the rabbits and the salmon, and a licence by-and-by!'

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'Come, Bernard,' said Dr. May's cheery voice behind; then, as he shook hands with Clement, 'You must find your way over to Stoneborough when you are settled here. Our church is a sort of rival to yours.'

'Not mine,' protested Clement; but the Doctor was in a hurry, and was off. Business was to be done with the family lawyer, and Felix got a hint that he might be wanted after a time, so he betook himself to a nook in the cloister, redolent with old memories, and began a letter to Mr. Audley. Clement, as he really believed with malice prepense, put himself entirely out of reach by starting off for a walk with Mr. Smiles, who, detecting that the London clergyman's mind was far from made up to bury himself in a dull, secluded, straggling country parish, had kindly volunteered to show him the beauties of the scenery.

Nearly two hours had passed, when a tall shadow came across the arch, and Clement's low eager voice asked, 'Have you any money about you?'

'Just about enough to get home with. Why?'

'How near is Ewmouth?'

'Nearly four miles. What *are* you after?'

'I can do it before dinner;' and the long legs seemed about to move off.

'Stay, Clement! What?'

'I must raise enough to get a bottle of port. There's a child sinking in typhus. Don't detain me, Felix. I find there's no help for it. I must have this place,' he added, as if throwing a tub to the whale to effect his escape.

'Stop, ask for some here.'

'No use. Squire forbids all giving in that quarter.'

'What do you mean to do?'

'I must dispose of—of—of— Well, it must be this,' touching his little cross, Ferdinand's gift, and nearly his favourite possession.

'Come! It won't do to make your début at Ewmouth by disposing of your jewelry. I left myself a margin of half-a-crown, and if we walk from the station, that will save two shillings more.'

'That will do,' said Clement. 'Thank you, Fee, you shall have it again. I had given all I had about me in the other hovel.

The woman is waiting in the churchyard. I'll send her off, and then tell you.'

Felix accompanied him through the beautiful summer garden to the rough rugged churchyard, where a lean woman in tattered drab-coloured garments by no means accorded with the paradisaical notion of Vale Leston. Her distress was so genuine that she scarcely thanked Clement; but assuring him she could now get what she wanted, she walked off.

Clement sighed, and looked up at the great massive church, not with Felix's pitying love, but like a mighty burthen.

'Well, Clem!'

'Well! I see it must be done.'

'I am very glad.'

'I am sure I am very sorry,' said Clement, with a simplicity new in him.

Before any more could pass, a servant came in search of them to summon them to Mr. Underwood's room. He looked worn and sorrowful, but there was a certain look of pleasure at the entrance of the two young men; and he made a sort of introduction of them to the lawyer, Mr. Wilder, a London solicitor, then turning to Felix, he once more asked if he still declined all idea of eventually taking the living.

'Certainly I do, thank you, Sir.'

'So,' said Mr. Underwood, 'as is only just, the offer is passed on to your brother.'

Clement bowed his head, colouring crimson, and the tears coming into his eyes, as with a trembling lip he answered, 'Thank you, Sir; I will do my best, God helping me.'

It was curious how this weight of responsibility was extinguishing self-consciousness, and making a man of him. The tone of his reply seemed to surprise both Squire and lawyer; and the former said, in an old man's tone of encouragement, 'That is well. No one can say more. Now give us your full name, that we may get on with the formalities.'

'Edward Clement Underwood, B.A., St. Cadoc's.'

'Edward?'

'It is my first name, but I have never been so called.'

'Edward! Strange it should so come about! Well, you may

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do pretty well here. Small tithes commuted for £420—(Rather a contrast, thought Felix, to the recent difficulty of raising a few shillings!)—a fair provision for a young man; if you are content not to launch out, nor be in a hurry to marry.'

'Certainly not,' said Clement, with an emphasis that made everybody look up to see whether he showed any tokens of having met with a disappointment in love; but if his cheeks were redder than usual, lip and eye were steady and resolute enough.

'I hope not,' proceeded his patron: 'it is the worst thing a young man can do to get his neck into the noose before he has had time to look about him. And there's the Vicarage—been used to enlarge our stable room—will have to be rebuilt altogether: so you had best let your horse keep your residence for the present, and come and look after the old man. I would not be much of a burden to you; but this is a big house, and it is getting lonesome.'

'I will do whateyer I can to be a comfort to you, Sir,' said Clement earnestly. 'It is very kind in you, and I will certainy come first to you. Only, Sir, I ought to warn you that I have been bred up in a very stringent school of principles, and that if I come here, I shall feel it my duty to do my best to carry them out.'

Mr. Underwood smiled at the lawyer. 'How exactly boys get the trick of their father. I could think this twenty years back! Well, changes for the worse there *can't* be! Ungrateful set of drunken poaching rascals as ever lived! And as to the church, what notions you may bring there won't do me much harm, so long as you don't bring it about your ears. Only, look you, Edward, a word in your ear. Don't let Jane—Mrs. Fulbert, I mean—cajole you into doing up the Vicarage for her.'

'Very well, Sir,' said Clement dreamily.

'You had better stay on a few days and look about you; I'd send you over to see the Bishop.'

'No, Sir, thank you, I must get back to-morrow. I have little enough time to prepare for my Ordination, but I will come down as soon after as Mr. Fulmort can make it convenient to spare me.'

'Ay, and little Smiles will see to the duty meantime; but I say, Edward, you are inexperienced, and he is a dirty little dog.

Don't let him expect anything from you till you've read in. He's got his quarter, and 'tis the churchwarden's business to provide.'

Felix hoped other people did not find Clement's face so intelligible as he did when this turned out to be the warning to inexperience. There was little more to be done, and the conference broke up to give the Squire time to rest before dinner.

'And now, my dear Vicar,' said Felix, linking his arm into his brother's, and leading him to a walk beneath a wisteria-covered wall, 'let me hear what brought you to this laudable resolution.'

'I wish it may be laudable,' said poor Clement, brushing away a couple of great tear-drops; 'I only know I have taken leave of all comfort or ease of mind for life, and I suppose that may be right!'

'I thought,' said Felix, a little hurt, 'that my father's objection to this place was its perfect ease.'

'A good deal has gone to the bad since his time,' said Clement, 'and well it may! I could think of nothing but the traffic in Babylon the Great of "the souls of men," and wonder whether I was sharing in it! Not a word as to my fitness or unfitness, not an attempt at inquiry! I might be the veriest disgrace to my Orders for what they cared, so long as my name is Underwood!'

'And, Edward!' said Felix, 'I can't but be touched to see how the poor old man feels it an act of restitution. It is the best he knows, Clem, his first step, and I am glad you have not baulked him of it.'

'It is a vicious and rotten system altogether,' said Clement, 'and I am not sure how far one is justified in submitting to it.'

'And now, without going into the question of lay-patronage, what brought you to submit to it?'

'I'll tell you, Felix. I set out to walk with Smiles, to see the place, and set Shaw so far on his way home. We went on beyond the village street, where all looks smooth and fair—all roses and gable-ends—like the model place you fancy it, and maybe it was in Father's time. On by the little river—'

'The Leston. Isn't it beautiful?'

'It is like places I saw in Wales. Well, there is another little ravine running down to meet that—very wild—a show place.'

'Blackstone Gulley. Isn't there a quarry?'

'Indeed there is; and *such* a set of hovels round it, run up in a

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hollow without a notion of health or comfort! It seems the demand for the stone is uncertain; so these wretched quarrymen are half their time poaching and pilfering, a villainous ferocious lot, that do all the harm in the neighbourhood—in fact, the Squire flew into a rage at the very name. He had forbidden anything from his house to be given to them; and even the Miss Hepburns were afraid to go among them. What are you laughing at, Felix?'

'Because I see why Mr. Smiles took you that way. Go on.'

'He took us to the best point of view, but told us we had better not go down, as typhus was raging there. I offered to wait if he had any one to visit; and behold! it was against the principles of both to go unless they were sent for. Mr. Shaw said it was making oneself too common, and Mr. Smiles had to consider Mrs. Smiles and the children. By that time we had been seen, and a woman sallied out to speak to him; and would you believe it, he tried to warn her off with "You see I have gentlemen with me! I always tell you to go to Mr. Tripp!" Then it struck me that I need not stand on the etiquette our Vicar is always so particular about, since it is nobody's parish just now, and I had the offer; so I offered to go and see what she wanted. Smiles said a good deal about the deceitfulness of the women, and the danger of venturing when the men were at home, as if one had never been down a court in Whittingtonia.'

'And was it very bad?'

'Bad, yes. Except that there's clear air and water outside, it is as miserable as anything I ever saw in town, and more squalid and savage. Four huts with cases of typhus! Though after all, it is not worse than our district is in the winter; and it is by tens, while that is by hundreds. Moreover, Ewmouth is getting into this parish, building fast on this side. When I saw and heard those two men, and knew the place would be turned over to one or other of them, I could not leave it to such a fate!'

'Quite right; and not at all what the curate expected.'

'I had thought,' continued Clement, 'that such clergy had become extinct; but I suppose nothing of a better stamp would have put up with the poor man we buried to-day. I had imagined the choice only lay between me and some one who, if without my advantages, would be superior in experience and weight; but now I see the

alternative: it is plain that it is a call, though why—why it should have come to me, I cannot think.'

'Perhaps,' said Felix, 'because we are especially bound to fight against the evil our family has allowed to accumulate.'

'At my age, and all alone! I say, Felix,' after a pause, 'can one get the key of the church?'

'The door into the cloister used not to be kept locked,' said Felix, turning in that direction; and then, struck by the loveliness of the lights and shadows, and the banksias trailing over the cloister tracery, he could not help exclaiming, 'There's no place like it! You will grow very fond of it, Clem!'

'I dare say I shall,' said Clement, to whose eyes the beauty seemed to go for nothing, and who was quite past his usual heed to keeping up his dignity with his brothers; 'I dare say I shall when I have worked here a little while; but I had rather have had the dingiest cell in the clergy-house and Fred Somers. Just as I had got back, when we thought we should have such a time of it—working together there, for life perhaps!'

'You might have him for a curate.'

'Fred! He'd never come to "easy duty in a romantic country and eligible neighbourhood,"' indignantly quoted Clement; 'and for my part, with only a population of eight hundred, if I were to set up a curate, I should just give myself over to be a fat, double-chinned, easy-going incumbent!'

'You're a good way from that,' said Felix, looking at the tall slight being by his side; 'but I think you are right. I am as sorry for you as can be, Clem, when I think of your pleasant evenings at the clergy-house, and what it will be with that poor old man; but you see he ought to be cared for as well as the parish, and there is no one but you who can do it.'

'I must try!' said Clement, with something of a gasp.

'Well,' said Felix, who had by this time reached the door, 'I do feel obliged to you, Clement. This helps me immensely.'

It was a great consolation to Clement that one person at least did not congratulate him on the preferment that weighed on him so sorely; but after he had spent some time alone in the church, he had mastered himself, and was quite satisfactory all the evening. Their dinner companions were the widow and her mother. The

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former did not look very much crushed, though she carried a large pocket-handkerchief; and her mother declared that nothing could have brought her down but her desire to be acquainted with her cousins. Felix could not help thinking of the pic-nic; and before long he perceived the drama that was being enacted. Her great object was evidently to stay on, and continue the ruler of the Priory; and Mr. Underwood was equally desirous to get her, not only out of the house, but out of the village; but he could not quite tell her so on the day of the funeral, and hints neither of them would take. Then she fastened upon Clement, and discoursed to him about *her* charities, and her regrets that during her dear Fulbert's long decline she could do so little; only she knew things were in such excellent hands with the Miss Hepburns, good old ladies, perfectly devoted, treasures for any parish; but for herself—she was only too much at liberty now, she should be delighted to go the round of the parish with him, and introduce him to her own peculiar pets!

Clement could not snub direct; but he only bowed, he did not commit himself; only in all simplicity he did ask about these charities, and only succeeded in raising a mist of words, in which the desirableness of not destroying self-dependence, and the pauperizing tendency of liberality, were the prominent ideas.

Clement ventured a question about Blackstone Gulley; but Mrs. Underwood hurriedly cautioned him under her breath not to say a word about it before the Squire, it excited him so fearfully—the people were such desperate poachers and thieves, and did such wanton mischief! They were evidently viewed as quite out of the pale of humanity.

Little did the lady imagine that they were the chief attraction to the Vicar-elect!

The brothers had to be off so early the next morning, that they made their farewells that night. Mrs. Underwood hospitably told Clement they would be better acquainted; but when he took leave with the old Squire, his hand was held fast, while the broken eager voice entreated, 'You'll soon be back—you'll come soon? You shall have the study, and any rooms in the house you like.—Been down to the stables? Just say which saddle-horse you like best; I'll have him kept for you.'

'Thank you, Sir, but I am a very good walker.' (Felix was glad he did not say he could not ride—a degeneracy in an Underwood that plainly had not occurred to the Squire.)

'Nonsense! Can't get about in this country without a horse. Mind, I didn't mean that you should keep it for yourself. Take a look, if you have not yet, and say which of the two.'

'The quietest!' exclaimed Clement, in a tone nearly of entreaty, diverting to his elder brother, who had had enough pony-back before his eighth year, with a little subsequent refreshment on Mr. Audley's horse, to give him a pitying disdain for anxieties on that score.

'Eh? You are a steady-going parson—don't want a showy beast? That's as young parsons are now-a-days. Well, you shall have the chestnut, very good to ride or drive. Write, I say, as soon as you can fix your day. You might see the Bishop in town. Only don't,' lowering his voice, 'leave me long alone with Jane.'

Just after the hot water had been brought to the brothers' rooms the next morning, there was a simultaneous knocking at the door of communication, and then an equally simultaneous turning of the handles, which was of course ineffectual, till Felix let go, and Clement got it open; and they stood laughing at each other, each holding an envelope, one addressed to F. Underwood, Esquire, the other to the Reverend Edward Underwood, each containing a cheque for £10, and scrawled on the flap of each—'To cover expenses of journey. F. U.'

'Expenses of journey—poor old man!' said Felix. 'It would go some way to a special train!'

'I suppose this is myself,' said Clement.

'Ah, you'll have to resign yourself to be Edward for the rest of your days.'

'Do you mean to take it?'

'Impossible not to let him have the pleasure of it. Poor man, depend upon it he is wishing it had been my father all the time. And it might have been—' Felix's face quivered and contracted. 'No, it won't do to think of that. But, Clem, look here—we won't exactly walk from Paddington; but deducting the one pound five that this really has cost me, you shall take the rest of mine for Blackstone Gulley.'

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'It must have cost you more.'

'No, for I was coming to town any way. Did I not tell you that I am to meet poor Edgar's creditors on Cherry's behalf, and settle with them?'

'Poor Cherry! It has been a noble thing for her to have carried out, but one cannot but feel it wasted.'

'No,' said Felix, 'she will never feel it so. Whatever she may do for the future, she will be able to feel that she has been just before she was generous. Remember, she will have sent our name home again cleared of debt. I am proud to owe that to her! Now, whichever of us is ready first must write the old man a grateful note, and we will both sign it.'

'Stay, Felix! I can't have you giving this to my people. I shall have plenty.'

'In time, but I don't expect you will have much in hand for some time; and if the Squire is so furious against these people, you won't like to ask him. Besides, they are my people, in a way, as well as yours; and if this is really the earnest of my inheritance, I should like it to go to them.'

END OF VOL. III.

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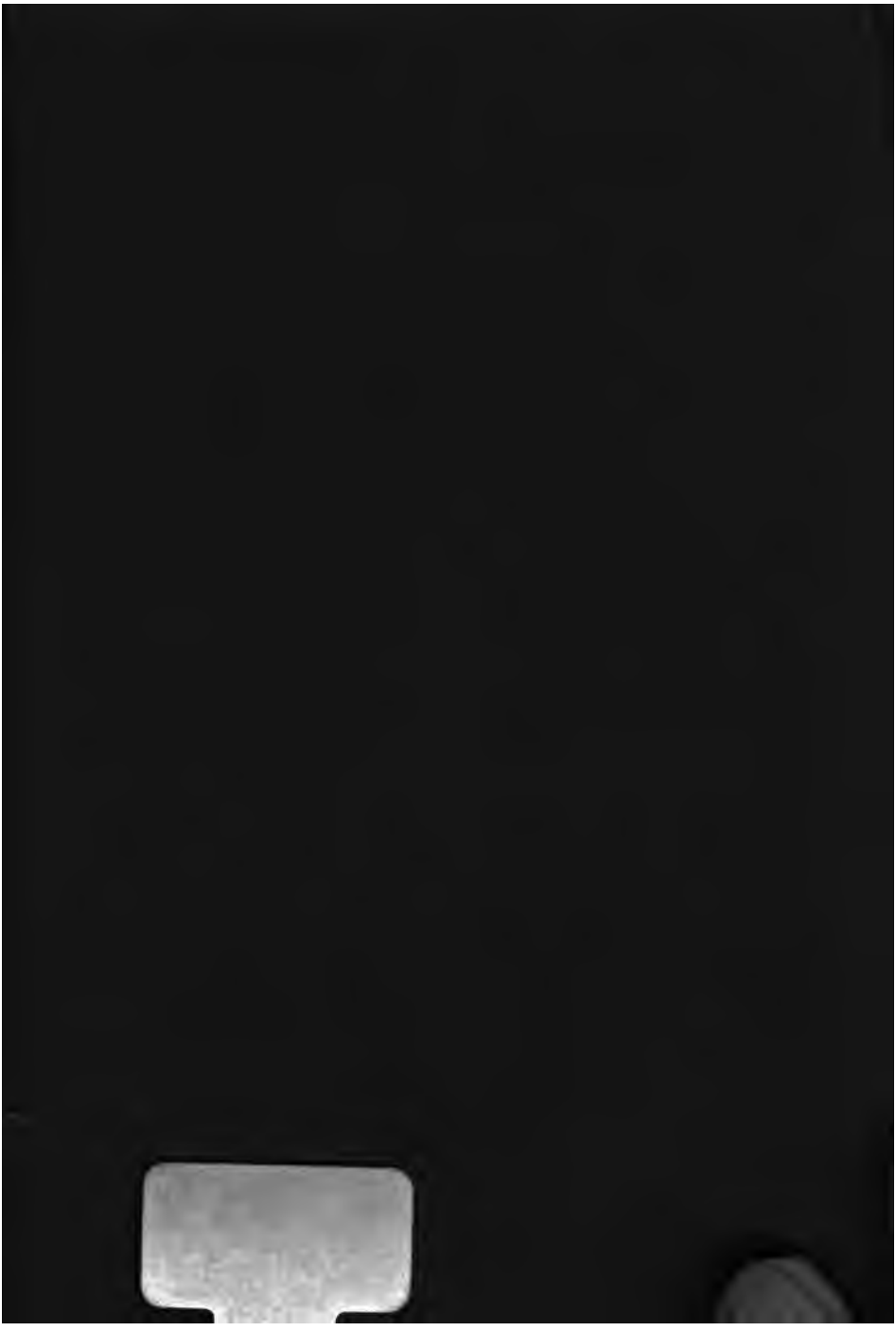
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